
SPICE & WOLF
VOL. 13
Side Colors III
ISUNA HASEKURA

Spice & Wolf

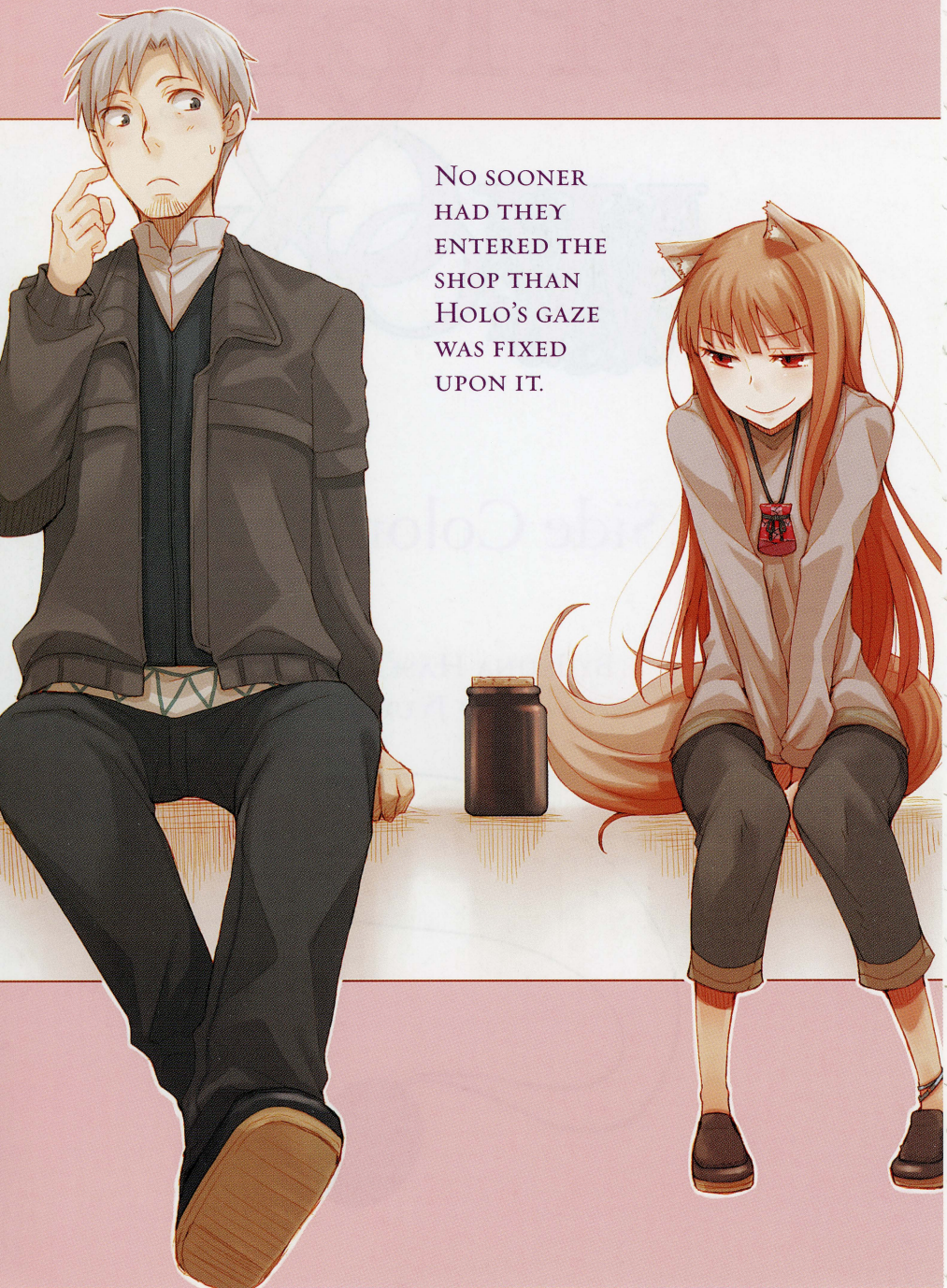
Vol. 13

Side Colors III

By Isuna Hasekura
Illustrated by Jyuu Ayakura



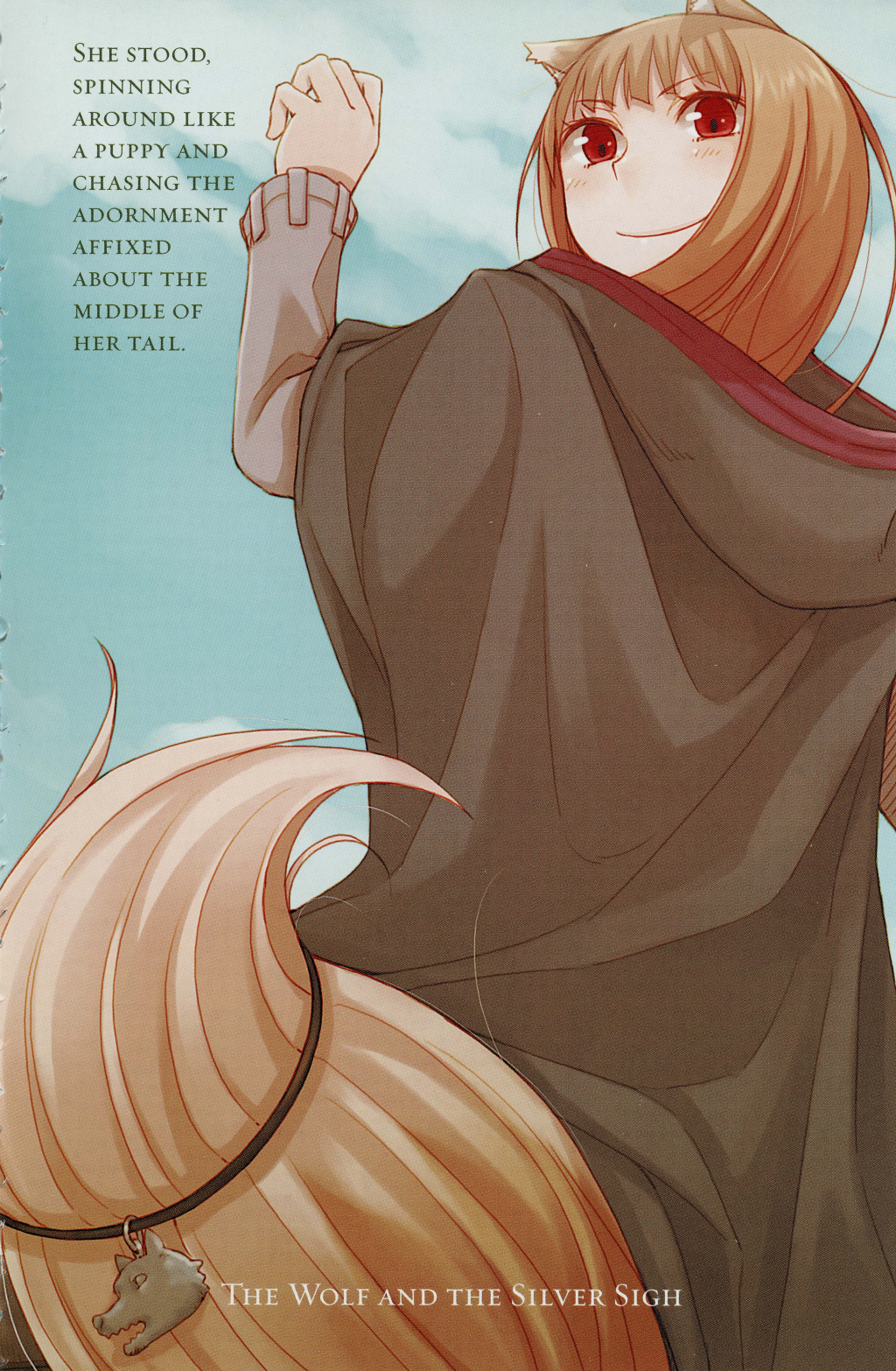
The Wolf and the Honeyed Peach Preserves

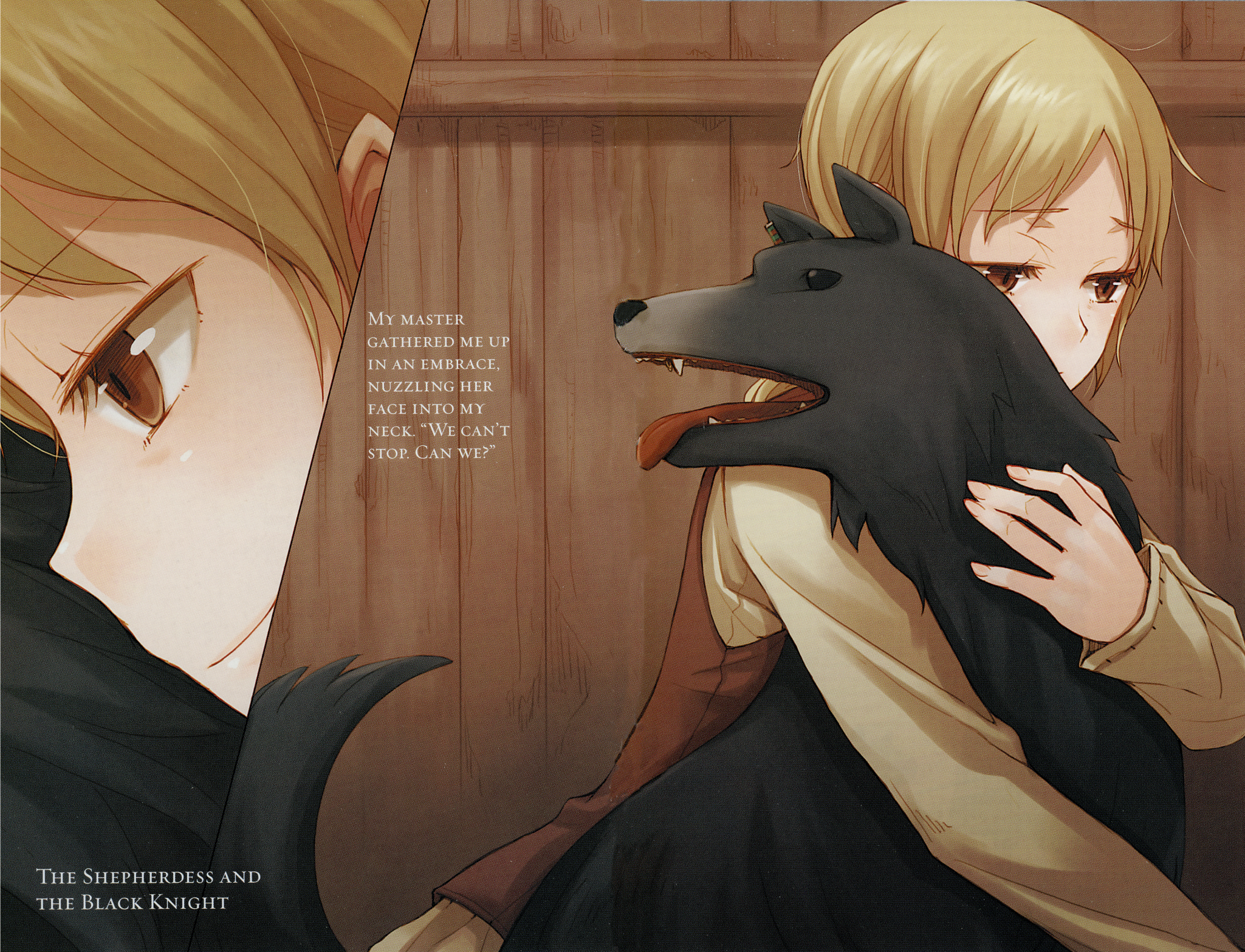



Holo then grabbed his hand with hers, as though she had been waiting for just that moment. It was a pleasant winter's afternoon, and the only sound was the rattling of the cart.



The Wolf and the Twilight-Colored Gift


She stood, spinning around like a puppy and chasing the adornment affixed about the middle of her tail.


My master gathered me up in an embrace, nuzzling her face into my neck. "We can't stop. Can we?"

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VOLUME XIII

SIDE COLORS III

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ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation: Paul Starr

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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SPICE & WOLF



The Wolf And The Honeyed Peach Preserves

Even in a medium-small town, the luxuries of the location, which informed a decision to stay or push on, varied widely based on the town's status as a trading hub.

In this one, there were mountains and forests nearby, from which flowed a beautiful river. And being blessed with fertile soil, the town fairly overflowed with agricultural bounty.

Hardy crops sold at a healthy price, and the resulting healthy profits led to a bountiful lifestyle, which in turn made bountiful harvests all the easier.

This town was a perfect exemplar of this virtuous cycle, and come winter, it brimmed with a variety of goods, along with merchants come to buy the same, travelers laying in provisions, and entertainers and priests alike looking to practice their arts on the abundant visitors.

The marketplace in such a town's center was always raucous with this activity, as were the areas surrounding it filled with the hustle and bustle of townspeople plying their trades. Cobblers and tailors. Money changers running their businesses out of their wagons. Smiths selling travelers much-needed knives and swords—all were doing a flourishing business.

Look to the left or look to the right—everywhere were people, people, people.

Moreover, depending on the wind, delicious scents came wafting by—baked bread, frying fish—and one could hardly be blamed for being drawn to their sources, especially if days and days had been spent on the road in the cold, dry winter air, all the while eating nothing but stale bread and bad wine.

Perhaps unwilling to beg Lawrence to stop in front of every single stall they passed, Holo sat next to him in the wagon's driver's seat, clinging to his sleeve.

"Hare... catfish... roasted chestnuts... sausage..." She intoned every food they passed, like a child reciting words she had memorized.

If given leave to sample the goods as she pleased, Holo could surely spend a full gold coin in a mere three days.

The street was so crowded that Lawrence could not spare a sideways glance, but from Holo's constant murmuring, he nonetheless had a good sense of what sorts of food could be had there. Being some distance from the sea, it seemed there was little in the way of fruit. Instead, meats of all kinds were abundant, and just as Lawrence felt an especially hard tug on his sleeve, he noticed they were passing a shop that was roasting a whole pig on a spit, slowly turning as oil was drizzled over it—a time-consuming and difficult task, but one that produced a fine product. The man doing the cooking, who seemed to be the shopkeeper, was stripped to the waist and sweating, despite the winter cold.

Children licking their fingers gathered around, as did travelers, all anticipating a tasty treat.

"...I want to eat something like that myself, once... just once," said Holo wistfully, noticing Lawrence's glance at the sight and evidently deciding it was an opportune moment to speak up.

Lawrence merely straightened and cleared his throat. "If my memory is to be trusted, I'm quite sure I treated you to a whole roasted piglet at one point." Holo had devoured it entirely on her own, getting her hands, mouth, and even her hair covered in grease.

It was unlikely she had forgotten the experience, Lawrence thought, but Holo merely arranged herself in the driver's seat.

"Such a thing would fill my belly for only so long."

"...Perhaps, but there's no way you could eat an entire roast pig." It was not impossible that it weighed more than she did. Lawrence wondered if she would claim a readiness to assume her true form in order to manage the feat. Such would have been a serious case of misplaced priorities, but Holo only looked at Lawrence as though he were a very great fool.

"That is not what I am saying," she said.

"Then what?" Lawrence asked. He truly did not understand the point at which Holo was angling.

"You don't get it? You're a merchant, yet you don't understand the wishes of another?" A certain amount of pity colored her expression, which wounded his merchant's pride more than being called a fool or a dunce possibly could.

"H-hang on." Lawrence could not let this stand.

Pigs. Pork. A piglet being insufficient for her. Given the way she had just spoken, this was not about meat.

"Ah."

"Oh?" Holo cocked her head, as though wondering whether he had figured it out.

"I suppose you didn't get enough of the skin, then?"

"...Wha...?"

"It's true, there's less of it on a piglet. Still, well-roasted pork skin...it's a luxury, that's for certain. It's crunchy, and when eaten with the meat, the oil spreads out in your mouth, and it's even better with a good amount of salt..."

"Fwa!" Holo had been watching Lawrence with her mouth wide-open. She hastily wiped the drool from it and then looked away sullenly.

It was cruel talk to subject her to, after so many days of nothing but dry bread, salty pickled cabbage, and garlic. But from the way Holo coughed two or three times and wiped her mouth as though ridding it of an irritation, his guess had been off the mark.

The expression displayed under her hood was most displeased as well.

"What, that wasn't it?"

"Not even close. Still...," Holo said, wiping her mouth one more time and pulling her chin in. "That does sound rather tasty..."

"Well, you can't get the skin unless you order a whole roast pig, and even with the two of us eating, too much meat would go to waste. I've even heard of nobles eating nothing but the skin and throwing the meat away, but..."

"Oh ho." Holo was always serious when discussing food.

Lawrence smiled in spite of himself. "So," he continued. "What could it be, then? You're not satisfied with a piglet, which means..."

"Mm?"

"It's not the skin, right? Sausage, then? Or boiled liver? That's not my favorite, but liver can be quite popular."

For a moment, Lawrence wondered if she meant she wanted to eat the item in question raw on the spot. She was a wolf, after all; but if they asked for a whole pig liver raw, they would instantly be suspected of being pagans, and the Church would be notified.

Still.

"Fool," said Holo abruptly, as though to negate everything he was thinking. "You truly are a fool."

"I don't think someone who drools at every mention of food should be talking...," he said, earning an immediate pinch to his thigh. Holo seemed determined to give him something to regret if he was going to lead her on with talk of food.

Just as Lawrence was reflecting on having teased her too much, Holo sneered at him. "Even I don't have such a large stomach. A piglet is more than enough for me," she grumbled.

So what was it, then? At this point, he could not very well ask her again or he'd have no cause to complain when she grabbed his face. Whenever Holo put a riddle to him, Lawrence could always solve it.

He thought back again, and the answer came to him quite readily.

Looking at Holo's forward-facing, irritated profile, Lawrence laughed a quiet, defeated laugh. "So you want us to go together and have a meal we can't possibly finish, is that it?"

Holo glanced at him, then smiled a bashful smile. It was enough to make Lawrence want to pick her up in his arms.

Wolves felt lonely so very easily, after all.

"You see, then?"

So, a meal tonight, too big for them to eat?

When Holo smiled, her fangs were slightly visible behind her lips. Lawrence got the feeling he had seen something he should not have and hastily looked ahead. He did not want to erase Holo's smile, and her proposal was a very charming one.

However, such greed was the enemy of the merchant. An enjoyable meal came at a very unenjoyable price. Showing generosity like this was all well and good, but if it became a habit, it would soon be a problem.

Did this make him a miserly person? No, no—as a merchant, he was right.

Lawrence gripped the reins as he argued with himself,

tightly enough for them to creak audibly. And then, he noticed something.

Beside him Holo was doubled over as she tried to restrain her laughter.

"..."

Her tail swished to and fro from the effort.

Irritated, Lawrence looked ahead, which made Holo burst out laughing. In the busy, bustling town, nobody noticed the laughter of one girl on a lone wagon.

So Lawrence decided not to notice it, either. No, indeed, he would not. He swore to himself in no uncertain terms that he would ignore her. And yet he was perfectly aware that this action would itself amuse her to no end.

Once Holo had finished her laughter at the expense of his tortured thought processes, she wiped the corners of her eyes—not her mouth. "My thanks for the meal!"

"You're quite welcome," Lawrence answered with sincerity.

"What? No rooms?"

The first floor of the inn was set up to serve light meals, and now, shortly before sunset, it was already raucous with activity.

A thick ledger book in one hand, the innkeeper scratched his head apologetically with his other. "There have just been so many people recently. My apologies, truly..."

"So it'll be like this at the other inns, too?"

"Reckon it will. Times like this, it makes me wish the guild would loosen their rules a bit, but..."

The more people the owners could pack in, the more profit an inn stood to make, so profit was generally limited by the number of boarders. But if an inn was overcrowded, the building could collapse or disease could break out. Such conditions also made it easier for untoward professionals like thieves and fortune-tellers

to mingle, so restrictions on the number of guests tended to be very strict.

For a guild member, defying the guild was like defying a king.

The innkeeper closed the thick ledger. "If you'd like some food, that much I can manage," he offered remorsefully.

"We'll come again later."

The innkeeper nodded in lieu of a reply, perhaps too used to hearing such promises. Given how crowded it was, there was no chance a room would open up, so Lawrence returned to the wagon. He faced Holo and wordlessly shook his head.

Quite accustomed to travel herself, Holo nodded, as if to say she had expected as much. But under her hood, her features were showing a bit of strain.

Well versed in this scenario, she was no doubt already imagining the camp they would have to make at the outskirts of the town if they failed to find a room. To avoid that, the only option was to find a place to park the wagon and borrow some bedclothes—someplace like a stable, a trading company, or a church.

That would have been easier enough in a larger town, but in this middling one? It was hard to say.

If they did not find a place to park the wagon by the time the market closed and the sun set, they would just have to leave town again, as Holo was fearing. Lawrence would not have minded this so much had he been alone, but it was more troublesome now that Holo was with him.

Given the conditions, it was certain that many other travelers were preparing to do the same, and if it came to that, heavy drinking would certainly follow. A group of travelers weary of the asceticism forced on them by the journey could become rather rowdy once they began to drink. Lawrence did not even want to think about what could happen if a girl like Holo were

added to the mix. Carousing was pleasant enough when times were good, but travel weariness like this called for care: weak wine slowly drunk, a hot meal, and a warm bed.

Holding on to that hope, Lawrence continued down the inn-lined street.

The second and third turned him away, and he arrived at the fourth just in time to see the people in front of him refused.

When he returned to the wagon, Holo seemed to have already given up and was loosening her bootlaces and belt in the wagon bed.

If he tried the fifth inn, the result would be the same surely.

Yet there was a great difference between having a roof and lacking one.

He pulled on the reins and wheeled the wagon about, threading a path through the hustle and bustle of people hurrying to finish the day's work. In times like these, he envied those with a home to return to so much it angered him, and he felt a terrible misery at not being able to gain so much as a shabby inn's room.

Perhaps noticing his frustration, Holo purposefully drew close to him. Pathetically, he felt himself relax all over. Despite it all, he *did* have Holo by his side.

Lawrence stroked her head through the hood, and she smiled, ticklish.

It was a single, simple moment in their travel. And then, just then—

"They'll be ready to eat in a week, I hear," came a voice from alongside the wagon.

On the crowded street, there was little difference between wagon-drawn traffic and walking, so it was easy to overhear other conversations. From the white dust on the men's faces and arms, Lawrence inferred that they were bakers taking a break from their work.

They seemed to be talking about a shop somewhere along the street.

"Ah, you're talking about what the young master of the Ohm Company said? Still, I'm surprised the boss would accept the work of someone like that. And then to order us to put it on the bread we bake? Absurd, I say!"

"Now, now. He pays us well and buys up the finest wheat bread we can bake. Even you like kneading the best wheat flour there is sometimes, eh?"

"Aye, I suppose... still..."

The one man seemed displeased with the item orders placed by a certain trading company's young master. Bakers were a famously proud lot, even among craftsmen, so the order had to be something that went against his professional standards.

It took long, hard effort to become a craftsman, and then there was a final test to become a master—covering everything from the weighing of flour to the difficult techniques necessary for shaping the dough for rolls. Given all that, they seemed to be discussing the matter at hand in the light of exceptional professional pride.

But what was this bread being topped with?

Still leaning against Lawrence, Holo was very still, he could tell, as she listened carefully.

Lawrence followed the bakers' gazes to their end, where the street was lined with the eaves of building after building.

There was a candlemaker, a tallow seller, a needle maker, a button maker. Of those, only the tallow seller sold anything edible, and Lawrence could not imagine they were baking bread topped with hunks of fat.

Then the answer came into his vision.

The apothecary's shop.

One of the presumable bakers spoke, and everything was made

clear. "Our bread's at its tastiest when eaten alone! It's a mistake to put such stuff on it. And anyway, it's too expensive. Do the things turn into gold when preserved in honey? It's absurd!"

"Ha-ha. You're just complaining because you can't afford it yourself?"

"L-like hell I am! I've no interest in the stuff! Honeyed peach preserves? Bah!"

Lawrence's gaze flicked back to Holo, whose ears pricked up as though they had been poked with a needle. He would not have been surprised had they shot right through her hood.

Holo did not move. She was very, very still. But this was not some surprising display of self-control. It was quite the opposite.

Her tail lashed to and fro beneath her robe almost painfully, as though it had been lit on fire. Pride, reason, and gluttony all warred within her in a terrible tug-of-war.

The bakers continued their conversation about bread, and their quicker stride took them away from the wagon. Lawrence watched them go, then stole a sidelong glance at Holo beside him.

He wondered if it would be best to pretend nothing had happened.

The thought occurred to him for the merest instant, but the fact that Holo continued to simply sit there, not begging or pleading, was itself rather terrifying.

If he was truly a skilled negotiator, then this would be the time to prove it. If his opponent would just say something, it would give him the chance to refute or deflect it. But so long as there was nothing, he had no room to maneuver.

"S-seems like it'll be cold tonight," said Lawrence, scattering some conversational bait.

Holo said nothing.

This was serious.

Lawrence thought about the roasted pigskin. Anyone would be

desperate, after making it all the way to a town only to be confronted with another cold night and a meal of bad bread and bad wine.

At the very least, the food situation could be remedied.

But honeyed peach preserves came at such a price. Would a single peach be ten *trenni* pieces? Or twenty?

It struck Lawrence as an absurd price, but it was true that he was capable of paying it. His coin purse could manage it, and there was Holo's smile to consider.

Her silence was without her usual teasing and mischief.

In the end, Lawrence chose her.

"...I suppose it can't be helped. Let's visit the apothecary and see if we can't find something to warm ourselves."

Holo remained motionless. Motionless, yes, but her ears and tail quivered with a puppy's glee.

The apothecary sold medicine, as one might expect, but also dealt in a variety of other goods.

In a town, the cobbler sold shoes and the tailor clothes, and generally the various guilds stayed in their own territories. Thus, the tailor could only also alter clothes, and a cobbler repair only shoes. A tallow seller could not sell bread, nor could a fishmonger sell meat.

By this logic, an apothecary ought to have only sold medicine, but it was common sense that offering a wider variety of goods brought in more customers, as any merchant knew perfectly well.

Thus, apothecaries would use all sorts of convoluted logic to pull in a great variety of goods. The products most likely to cause quarrels with other shops were none other than spices. Apothecaries would claim all sorts of spices were good for inducing sweat or lowering fevers, and thus qualified as medicine they could sell.

Extending that logic, anything good for one's health also counted as medicine, and thus it was that apothecaries had become the chief dealers in honey.

The only other merchants who dealt in honey were the candlemakers, who sold beeswax candles.

It was difficult for traveling merchants—who dealt in anything and everything money could buy—to understand the turf wars between town merchants. But it was thanks to those turf wars that there was such an array of honeyed preserves lined up before them.

Plum, pear, raspberry, turnip, garlic, pork, beef, hare, mutton, carp, barracuda—these were just the ones that sprung to mind.

When preserving food, one could use salt, vinegar, ice—or honey. During this time of year, when the end of the long winter was yet far away, the prices of these preserves were at their highest. The contents of the bottles and barrels here, each labeled with a hasty scribble, would all fetch a good price.

Among all those lined-up goods, there was one that outshone all the rest. In the farthest corner of the shop behind the shopkeeper, enshrined on a shelf beside the pepper, saffron, and sugar, was an amber-colored bottle.

No sooner had they entered the shop than Holo's gaze was fixed upon it.

"Welcome," said the bearded shopkeeper, looking from Lawrence to Holo.

He noticed that Holo's attention had been captured by something, so next he checked her manner of dress. One of his long eyebrows lifted minutely—the girl was well dressed, but not the man.

Whether or not he had concluded that even if they were here to shop, they would not be buying anything expensive, his tone was disinterested as he asked, "Are you looking for anything?"

"Something to warm us a bit. Ginger, perhaps, or..."

"Ginger's on that shelf."

The rest of Lawrence's sentence was cut off in his throat, and there it vanished. *If that's all you're here for, buy it and get out,* the shopkeeper seemed to be saying. Lawrence did as he was told and looked over the ginger on the shelf, deciding on a honey-preserved variety. It was cheap but good for eating while huddled under blankets with nothing else to do.

But then he noticed Holo's gaze on him—as though asking him, *We've come to this place after all that talk, and after raising my expectations like this, you can't just give up.*

And of course, Lawrence had no intention of doing so.

It was too easy to buy Holo's favor with food, and Holo herself found it tiresome on occasion. But when it came to honeyed peach preserves, things were different.

They had come up in conversation several times before, but as yet Lawrence had been unable to buy any. There was the matter of the high cost, of course, but more often than not they had simply been unavailable.

So perhaps that was why Holo's enchantment with the food now wafted off of her in waves.

Lawrence walked past the vibrating Holo to the shopkeeper to have him portion out some of the ginger preserves and pay. He was obviously going to start bargaining, but—

"That'll be ten *ryut*."

Lawrence paid and wordlessly took the goods. Behind him he could feel Holo staring, stunned.

His eyes fixed upon the figure written on the label of the amber-colored bottle. One fruit for one *lumione*, or around thirty-five silver *trenni*.

For a moment he thought his eyes were mistaken, but no—that was indeed what was written there. The term *peaches of gold* was bandied about often enough, but even so—such a price!



After taking a goodly while to note what Lawrence was looking at, the shopkeeper spoke with a deliberately casual tone. "Ah, you've a good eye for quality. This year's peaches were very sweet and firm as well. The honey is the finest from Baron Ludinhild's forest. One *lumione* per fruit, and I've had many customers! Only three left, in fact. How about it?"

It was written on the man's face that he knew Lawrence could not purchase such a thing. In a town like this, without connections to large trading companies or urban nobility, it was outrageous to put such a price on honeyed peach preserves. That he was treating his customers with such open contempt was proof of how confident he felt in his position.

But Lawrence had the confidence that came from having completed many trades in large towns. His hand moved toward his coin purse out of irritation at being treated like some novice peddler.

It was not a sudden prideful desire to conserve money that stopped him. Rather, it was a keen understanding of exactly how many coins were within that purse, keener than any god's.

If he spent an entire *lumione* here, their travels might come to a premature end farther along the road. No merchant would be fool enough to keep their entire wealth on their person, so Lawrence was not carrying much on him at the moment.

Reality blocked the path to Holo's smile. Realizing this, Lawrence shook his head. "Ha-ha. Too much for me."

"Is that so? Well, come again if you change your mind."

Lawrence turned around and left the shop, and Holo followed obediently behind him. She did not raise a single word of reproach, which was somehow worse.

He felt as though he were being stalked by a wolf in a dark forest, its footsteps matching his.

He had let her get her hopes up, and then in the end, he had not bought the item of her desire, which was much worse than simply pretending not to notice from the driver's seat.

If he apologized first, it might lessen the wound, he thought; so steeling himself, he turned to her.

"..."

He was at a loss for words, but not because Holo's face was a mask of rage. Rather, it was quite the opposite.

"Mm? Whatever is the matter?" she asked. Her words had no particular force to them, nor was there fire in her eyes.

If her color had been poor, he would have suspected her of being ill.

"N-nothing..."

"I see. Well, hurry up and get on, then. Your seat's the farther one, is it not?"

"Er, yes..."

Lawrence did as he was told and climbed onto the wagon, as Holo followed closely behind him. He sat on the far side, and she settled herself down neatly next to him.

If she seemed many times larger when she was angry, then her dejection had the opposite effect. Her desire to eat the honeyed peach preserves was a terrible thing surely.

This was not the sort of case where Lawrence could laugh off her gluttony. Here in the cold, hard air, they had been surviving on nothing but stale bread and sour wine for some time. There were countless stories of a bowl of soup presented to a lost king and his troop, only to have that rewarded with a great treasure, and now he could see why.

There was no question that Holo had been deeply, sincerely looking forward to the honeyed peach preserves. And now she looked absently ahead, not even speaking a single word of frustration to him.

This had to be because she knew both the great cost of the preserves and the current state of Lawrence's coin purse.

Lawrence glanced over at her. Her body swayed with the jolts of the wagon. She seemed so absent that she might not have noticed if Lawrence were to suddenly embrace her.

The wagon trundled on.

They would probably be forced to make camp tonight. The only thing that made the hard wagon bed tolerable was knowing that a soft pillow and piles of blankets awaited their arrival in the next town.

"..."

Lawrence tugged on his beard with such force that it almost hurt, then closed his eyes. Perhaps he ought to turn around and slam the entire contents of his coin purse onto the apothecary's counter.

And yet even as he reconsidered it, Lawrence's hands did not pull the reins.

A whole *lumione* for a single peach was simply too much.

In addition to how difficult it would make continuing in their travels if he were to spend his money thus, there was the simple fact that Lawrence believed in the exchange of goods and money for a fair price.

Sweat broke out on his brow as he agonized over the impossible decision. Next to him, Holo, her shoulders slumped, hardly seemed like she could manage yet another night in the cold. The only thing that would return a smile and some good cheer to her would be the moment she could eat the coveted preserves.

He had to buy some.

Lawrence made up his mind and pulled up on the reins.

Holo noticed this and looked up at him, questioning.

One fruit for one *lumione*.

It was expensive, but what was that compared to Holo?

What's more, the shopkeeper said he had three fruits left. If Lawrence did not hurry, it was likely he would sell them all. Business was so good in this town that eccentric young trade masters were putting them on loaves of bread and baking them, after all. It was not at all impossible that the apothecary would sell out.

The horse neighed and stopped, and just as Lawrence made to wheel around and head back into the crowd, he realized—

"Business is... good."

Here in this town where the market was lively, travelers were many, and everyone's business was booming. The town's wealth had to be proportionate to that.

If so, Lawrence mused as he stroked his beard, the ideas in his head clicking pleasantly into place.

When the notion was complete, Lawrence took the reins up yet again and headed the wagon back in its original direction.

A man—a traveler, by the look of him—shouted in anger at Lawrence's driving, but Lawrence merely begged it off with his mask of a merchant's smile.

At this sudden change, Holo peered at him dubiously.

Lawrence gave a short answer. "Let's drop by that trading company."

"...Mm. Huh?" Holo began to make a sound of assent, but it changed into a questioning tone as it left her mouth.

But Lawrence did not reply, simply continuing to drive the wagon in the same direction.

He needed money to buy the honeyed peach preserves, and if he did not have it, he merely needed to earn it.

His destination was a trading company. Specifically, the company the two bakers were discussing: the Ohm Company.

Without money, goods could not be sold, which meant that where goods were selling, money had to be flowing.

The company to which this simple notion had brought Lawrence was the sort you might find anywhere, its modest size perfectly in proportion to the size of the town. Yet it was immediately evident that for some reason, this particular organization was burdened with an excess of money.

The sky was reddening with the setting sun, and though it was the hour when craftsmen would soon be heading home, there was a great clamor of people in front of this shop.

Men ran about this way and that, their eyes darting about with exhaustion and excitement. Some—merchants, probably—held ledgers as they shouted in hoarse voices.

What they seemed to be dealing in was not wheat nor grain nor fish, nor even furs or jewels.

It was wood. And iron.

Those were the raw materials out of which parts of some kind had been constructed, along with the tools for making them.

Literal mountains of such goods were piled on the company's loading docks.

"....What *is* this?" murmured Holo.

They had seen many busy companies, but nothing like the strange energy that pervaded here. While other trading houses would soon be closing for the day, here it seemed as though the main event was just about to start.

"It seems to be materials for building some sort of...something. A crow's nest? No, this is..."

Lawrence did not know what the strange assemblage of parts was for. But farther in, he saw heaps of specialized goods, and something occurred to him.

No wonder this company was doing such good business. He smiled involuntarily at the thought.

Trading companies made money by buying goods, then selling them, so their biggest opportunities for profit came when they

could position themselves as a supplier for a large project of some kind. They would place orders with craftsmen, collect components, and move them along, converting them into their profit margin without letting them lie idle a single night.

Lawrence could certainly understand why this young master fellow would have hit upon the notion of baking bread topped with honeyed peach preserves. He must have felt as though he had discovered a fountain of gold.

He noticed Holo return to her senses and look dubiously around her, as though understanding why this trading company was so busy but unsure why she and Lawrence were here.

"Well, then," Lawrence murmured to himself. He climbed down from the wagon and strode calmly into the trading company.

It was so busy that nobody took notice of a single outsider like Lawrence walking in. Lawrence, for his part, had essentially memorized how to act natural in such situations.

Once he spied the man who seemed to be in charge, he spoke slowly and distinctly. "Hello, there. I've heard you're shorthanded, so I've brought my vehicle."

The merchant seemed not to have slept properly in days, and his eyes swiveled to glare at Lawrence.

In his hands were a quill pen and a tattered ledger, and his right eye drooped. Lawrence continued to smile as he waited for the man's answer.

Time seemed to have frozen, but the merchant finally returned to himself and spoke. "Ah, uh, yes. We've been waiting. Just take the goods straightaway. Which wagon's yours?"

His voice was hoarse and difficult to hear, and instead of an answer, Lawrence pointed to the item in question.

"What, that?" said the merchant rather rudely, but Lawrence was not flustered.

"I was thinking it would be best to load it as heavily as possible," said Lawrence deliberately.

"Mmm, it'll be slow, though... who recommended you to us? Why, I ought to... ah, well. Fine, load up what you can and leave. Quick about it, now."

Business paralyzed all sensibilities.

Lawrence was fully aware that in situations like these, those in charge of details like who was doing what job or who was assisting whom could not even try to keep track of them. So, brazenly, he followed up with another question.

"Er, the work came up so suddenly I didn't catch the details. Who shall I take payment from? And what's the destination?"

The man was mid-yawn, and made a face like a frog who'd had an insect fly right into his mouth and swallowed it right on the spot.

He had probably been about to hurl some abuse or at least some words of shock, but was too exhausted to turn down help, whatever form it took. He pointed to a man in the far corner who was battling some parchment on a desk. "Ask that fellow over there," he spat.

Lawrence looked in the direction indicated. He scratched his head, every bit the dullard merchant. "Yes, sir, right away, sir," he said.

The man seemed to forget about Lawrence that very same instant and set about giving orders to the men working on the loading dock.

Meanwhile, Lawrence ambled over to the man at the desk to receive his work orders.

There is an old story in the northlands that goes like this.

The men of a certain village could see to the far edge of the land, and if a bird took wing beyond the clouds, they could still

shoot it down with their bows. Likewise, the women of this village could smile happily no matter how cold the winter grew, and even while they slept, their hands continued to spin yarn.

One day, a mysterious traveler came to this village, and as thanks for the night he stayed there, he taught the villagers how to read and write. Up until that point, they knew nothing of writing and had relied on oral traditions to remember their history and important events. For this reason, whenever anybody died from an accident or illness, the loss was felt very keenly.

They were very thankful to the traveler.

Then, once the traveler had departed on his journey, they realized something.

The men could no longer see to the ends of the sky, and the women began to shirk their work, no longer able to do it without tiring. Only the children, who had not learned to read or write, were unaffected.

It was this story that came to Lawrence's mind as he regarded the pathetic young man who toiled drowsily away at the desk, constantly fighting off sleep as he frantically wrote.

Once the fetters of letters are around your ankles, they may as well be around your neck, went the the old phrase. Even the devil in hell would've had a little more mercy, Lawrence could not help but think.

"Excuse me," he said. Everything changed when there was money to be made.

The young merchant looked up at Lawrence like a sluggish bear. "... Yes?"

"The boss over there said that I could ask you about where these goods go and my wages as well." He was not lying. It just was not the entire truth.

The young merchant looked in the direction Lawrence indicated, then back at Lawrence, staring vacantly at him for a

moment. The pen in his hand did not stop moving. It was a bit of a performance.

"Ah, er... yes, quite. Well..." Papers and parchments were piled atop the desk one over the other, even as he spoke. Perhaps they corresponded to the amount of goods that were passing through. In any case, they were many. "The destination is... Do you know Le Houaix? There are signs pointing the way, so you should be fine, but... take... those goods there. Any of those, as much as you can carry."

As the man talked, his attention seemed to drift, his eyelids drooping and his speech slowing.

"And my wages?" Lawrence asked, patting the man's shoulder, which brought him back to wakefulness with a jerk.

"Wages? Ah, of course... Er... There are labels on the goods, so... just bring those back. Each one should exchange for about... a *trenni*... or so...," the man murmured, the words becoming mush in his mouth as he fell forward, asleep.

He would probably be in trouble if he was caught, but Lawrence felt bad for the young man and left him be, starting to walk away.

Lawrence had only taken three steps before he turned around and shook the sleeping man awake. He'd forgotten the other reason he had come here.

"Hey, you there, wake up. Hey!"

"Huh, whuh...?"

"This job came up so suddenly I haven't a place to stay. Can I rent a room here at this company?" A place of this size ought to have a room or two for resting in, Lawrence reckoned.

The man nodded, though whether it was out of exhaustion or in response to Lawrence's question was difficult to tell. He indicated farther back in the building. "The maid... is in the rear, so... ask her. You can probably get... some food, too..."

"My thanks." Lawrence gave the man a pat on the arm and left him.

Though Lawrence had done the man the favor of waking him up, he slumped immediately back into sleep—but it was no concern of Lawrence's now.

Lawrence approached the side of the wagon where Holo still sat. "I've found us a room."

Beneath her hood, her amber eyes flashed at Lawrence, and in them he could see a mixture of admiration and exasperation at his roughshod tactics. She looked away and then back, this time with a wordless question. *Just what are you planning to do?*

"I've got a job to do."

"A job? You—" Holo furrowed her brow and soon arrived at the answer, but Lawrence did not engage her further.

He prompted her to get down from the wagon. "They'll probably be at it all night, so it might be noisy."

Lawrence pulled on the reins with his left hand, bringing the wagon into the loading area. Given the commotion, he doubted anyone would have helped him in even if he had asked, but now that he was here, the men inside would just do their job. And indeed, the dockhands converged on the wagon, and in no time at all it was fully loaded.

Holo watched the scene, eyes wide, but then her expression began to turn steadily more displeased. She stared at him. Saying nothing, not moving.

"This'll earn us a bit of money. And a room, but..." He'd already explained what sort of room that would be.

It was clear that at this rate they faced making camp outside the town, and Lawrence wanted to give the exhausted Holo at least one night under a roof.

"We'll worry about tomorrow when it comes. For tonight, at least, let's... H-hey!"

Right in the middle of his explanation, Holo stormed off into the trading company.

She had pluck and wit enough to get herself a room, Lawrence knew. "What a bother," he muttered with a sigh, whereupon he noticed Holo—who was talking to a woman who was probably the maid—look over her shoulder and glance at him.

She moved her mouth as though she wanted to say something, but in the end did not open it. No doubt it had been some invective of some kind.

Fool.

The same word could mean very different things, depending on who said it and the circumstances surrounding the people.

Led by the maid, Holo disappeared farther into the building, alone. He had to laugh at her constant stubbornness, but he knew she was not much different from him in that regard. Lawrence was just as tired as she was, yet here he was, taking on extra work without so much as a break just so he could buy the honeyed peach preserves—the preserves upon which she had surely given up.

Lawrence climbed back atop the driver's seat and departed, the wagon bed piled high with goods. He felt a certain ticklish amusement, as though he were playing a perverse game.

Or perhaps it was what happened next that made him feel that way. As the wagon pulled away from the loading dock, he looked back and up at the building's third floor, and just then, a window opened and Holo looked out.

She had already taken out some of the honeyed ginger preserves, and putting a piece in her mouth, she leaned her chin on the windowsill.

"Truly, such a foolish male you are," her face said.

In spite of himself, Lawrence had the urge to raise a hand in a wave, but he resisted, gripping the reins and facing forward.

He gave the leathers a flick and made for the village of Le Houaix.

The merchant at the company had told Lawrence that he would know Le Houaix when he saw it, and shortly after he left the town, he knew the reason why.

The name Le Houaix was hastily scribbled on a temporary-looking wooden sign. Moreover, the town seemed to expect deliveries to continue through the night, as the path was well lit here and there by torches.

This was probably half to show the way, and half to watch out for unscrupulous drivers who were likely as not to simply take the load somewhere else and sell it off.

The sky had turned red and would soon be a deep, dark blue.

Everyone Lawrence passed seemed uniformly exhausted, and many of the drivers of empty-bedded wagons were asleep in the drivers' seats.

When he looked back, he could see others like him, all headed for the same destination. Some carried goods on their backs, others in bags on packhorses, and some drove loaded wagons. Their clothes and tack were all different, and all spoke very clearly of having been suddenly and temporarily assembled for the job.

The town seemed to be surrounded by fertile land, which would mean it would need a mill to grind the grain from its bountiful harvests. But waterwheels were not only useful for grain. Lush land would attract more people, and more people would bring more needs. Smithing, dyeing, spinning—all of these could make uses of a waterwheel's power.

However, constructing and maintaining such a thing was a very expensive proposition, and rivers where they were built tended to be owned by the nobility. Even when a waterwheel was

needed, its construction would often become tangled among conflicting interests and schemes.

Given how busy the trading company was, it seemed those interests had all finally been resolved and construction had been decided upon.

The hurry came from the thaw that would come with spring's arrival, when the melting snow would make construction very difficult. The company's plan was surely to build the dikes and install the wheel while the river was low. The rising water that would come with the spring thaw would power the wheel quite nicely.

Lawrence did not know whether it was going to succeed, but he could see the desperation in the operation. Of course, that was what allowed him to waltz right in the way he had, so he thanked his luck for that.

Moreover, this was the first time in quite a while he had conducted the wagon without Holo at his side, and while it would have been overstatement to say it was a relief, it was certainly a pleasant change of pace.

Formerly, he would have found driving alone an unavoidably lonely activity, and it made him reflect on how fickle humans were.

As the sun set, he shivered at a far-off wolf howl—this, too, for the first time in quite a while.

He stifled a yawn and kept his attention on the road, the better to keep the wagon's wheels out of holes and puddles. Soon he came to Le Houaix, where the glow of red torchlight brightened the moonlit night.

To the north of the village was a forest nestled against a steep upward slope, and through it passed the driver. Normally nightfall would drown the forest in darkness, but here the riverbank had been cleared and fires built along it so that it looked almost like a river of fire.

Here and there some workers caught what sleep they could, but Lawrence could see other craftsmen toiling away by the river. It was a larger construction project than Lawrence had anticipated; it seemed they were planning to build multiple waterwheels at once.

It seemed likely to yield unusually large profits.

Lawrence delivered the goods and received wooden tags in exchange, then cheerfully climbed back onto the wagon. His horse did not speak human language, but looked back at Lawrence with his sad purple eyes, as though to say, "Please, no more."

Lawrence nonetheless took up the reins and wheeled the wagon around, and with a smart crack, he urged his horse forward. This was a simple business—how much money he could make would depend on how many times he could repeat the trip.

The busy, hurried work made him reflect on his rarely remembered past. It might mean only trouble for his horse, but Lawrence came to smile thinly and drew a blanket over his shoulders.

How many trips would it take to reach the honeyed peach preserves? He mused over the question as the wagon rolled on under the moonlight.

The way to Le Houaix was chaotic.

In addition to the Ohm Company's aggressive hiring, the construction period was short enough that it was advertising its need for porters. As a result, throngs had gathered to get the work.

This was why most of the people that crowded the road all day were not merchants, but rather ordinary people trying to make a quick wage—farmers and shepherds, street performers and pilgrims, craftsmen with their aprons still on. It was as though the entire town had turned out for the job. Most of them carried loads on their backs as they set about doing the unfamiliar physical labor.

Moreover, while the road that led to the village of Le Houaix was not a particularly steep or severe one, it was beset by other problems.

The voices of wolves and wild dogs could be heard from the forest alongside the road, either in reaction to the presence of the people on the road or the food that they ate as they went, and at the crossing of a stream over which a shoddy bridge had been built, there was constant fighting over whose turn it was to cross.

The loads brought to the village had to be dealt with, not to mention the arrival of itinerant craftsmen who'd caught wind of the construction. Added to that was the traffic of women and children running to and fro to draw water from the river, to quench the thirst of the men coming to the village. The path from the village center to the river had become a veritable swamp thanks to all the water being spilled.

The village was sprinkled with soldiers, too, with swords at their waists and iron breastplates on their chests. No doubt the watermill's noble masters had come to make sure the work was proceeding well.

Earlier in the day, people were full of vigor and thoughts of the wages they might earn, so there were fewer problems. But as the sun went lower in the sky, strength waned and knees buckled, and the situation grew tense.

Even when he returned to the Ohm Company, the loaders' labors had slowed to a crawl from all the noise being made. On top of all that, some of the most dispirited porters were beginning to complain that wild dogs were now venturing onto the road.

Lawrence had made seven trips with his wagon and was beginning to feel quite fatigued. Even if the road was not so steep, the number of people was itself exhausting.

A quick check of his coin purse revealed that the day's earnings amounted to seven *trenni*. That was not a bad wage at all—in fact,

it was exceptionally good—but at this rate, it would take three or four days before he had enough to buy the honeyed peach preserves. As more people arrived, causing the work to back up, it might take even more time than that. He found himself inescapably irritated—he could earn more if he could just get his wagon loaded more quickly.

But there was a limit to the amount of work a person could do.

Lawrence took a deep breath, and there on his wagon, he did some thinking. Haste made waste. He would take a break and wait for nightfall. The crowds would thin, and he would be able to make more profitable use of his time. Such was the possibility Lawrence decided to bet on.

He pulled out of the line bound for the loading dock, then stabled his horse and wagon alike. The building was completely empty—all the other horses had been hired out. He then made for the room the trading company had spared him.

Whatever Holo had said to the housemaid, she had neither been chased out nor made to share a room with anyone else. Holo was there in the room alone, sitting in a chair by the window, combing out the fur of her tail, illuminated by the red light of the setting sun.

She did not spare the exhausted Lawrence a glance as he removed his dagger and coin purse and placed them on the table. "Well, isn't she the elegant one," Lawrence grumbled to himself but admitted that he was the one who'd told her to stay here. He managed to avoid blundering into the particular folly of voicing his irritation but wondered whether it was even worth it.

Such things went through Lawrence's mind as he collapsed sideways onto the bed. Then—

"There are two left, he said."

Lawrence glanced at Holo, not immediately understanding. She did not return his look.

"One sold, and another will probably sell soon, he said."

It took Lawrence a moment to realize that she was talking about the honeyed peach preserves.

While he had been tired, he had not expected her to thank him for his hard day's work, but he'd at least hoped for some enjoyably idle chatter. But no, after a day and night of pulling on the reins, he was being immediately pressed on the topic at hand.

Lawrence was unsurprisingly irritated, but as he replied, he tried to keep that from affecting his tone. "You went back there just to check on them?"

His annoyance made it through via the word *just*, but he was too tired to worry about such things. As he sat on the bed, he untied his bootlaces in order to remove his shoes.

"Will it be all right, I wonder?" Holo pushed him, and his hands froze for a moment. Soon thereafter they started moving again, and he finished removing his boots.

"At one *lumione*, they're not asking a price that most people can easily pay, and people who *can* easily pay that much aren't exactly common."

"Is that so. They're safe, then, no?"

It was an honest enough answer that it could have been taken at face value, but her deliberate tone grated on his already-tired nerves. He was considering explaining very carefully just how much money a single *lumione* amounted to when he stopped and thought better of it.

Holo had no particular reason to be deliberately irritating him, so it was probably exhaustion that was making him feel this way.

Lawrence calmed himself and loosened his clothing here and there in preparation for a nap.

Holo had looked over at him at some point, and he noticed her gaze just as he was readying himself to lie down and fully relax.

"After all, you must have earned quite a lot." Lawrence was

honestly surprised at her open hostility. "So tomorrow, then? Or are you back because you've earned enough already? You've made seven loads so far. That's got to amount to a goodly sum."

Biting, nibbling ants were an irritation, but the plunging stinger of the wasp was something to fear. Lawrence reacted to the teeth-baring, growling Holo mostly out of reflex, as he wondered where the nibbling Holo of a moment ago had gone. "Er, no, that only comes to seven silver pieces, so..."

"Seven? Oh ho. After all that haste, how long is it going to take you to earn a full *lumione*, then?"

He had seen her tail fluffed up in the reddish light when he had returned to the room, but now he realized it had been puffed out for a different reason.

But as he cast about, Lawrence's mind was a blank sheet. He had no idea what Holo was angry about.

Was it because the honeyed peach preserves were about to sell out? Or because she simply wanted to eat them as soon as possible?

His confusion had nothing to do with his exhaustion or anything so trivial. He purely and simply did not understand Holo's anger and was at an utter loss for words.

Holo's eyes blazed as red as a hare's in the setting sun. Her rage-filled gaze bore down on him, making Lawrence feel like his very life hung in the balance of his answer. The moment after that last absurd notion occurred to him, Lawrence realized something strange: What had Holo said just now? She had pointed out that he had made seven trips, but how did she come to have such detailed knowledge?

Not even the company merchants themselves would know exactly how many times they had loaded his wagon bed. It was as though she had been watching him from the window throughout the night.

As Lawrence thought of this, an "ah" escaped his lips. Holo's ears pricked up, and in her lap, her tail puffed out.

But that angry gaze was no longer directed at him, and he heard no bitter words. Instead, Holo's eyes narrowed, and she averted her eyes, as though wishing the red light of the setting sun would simply wash everything away.

"...Were you...," Lawrence began, but Holo literally snarled at him, and he cut himself off. "Uh, never mind," he mumbled.

Holo glared at him after that, but then sighed and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she did not look at Lawrence, but rather down at her hands.

Holo had probably been worried about him, but more than that, she had been lonely, left shut up in the room like this.

She had once said that loneliness was a fatal illness and had in the past put her very life at risk for Lawrence. He had not forgotten her, nor this. He could never forget.

That was why he had worked himself to the point of exhaustion for her, but simply feeling this way would not tell her anything. Just as Holo looking down at him from the window had not.

Even if it was a simple, tedious job, and even if it would only worsen her own exhaustion, Holo wanted Lawrence to bring her along. Anything was better than being left alone, she bravely seemed to think.

Lawrence cleared his throat to buy himself some time.

Since this was Holo, if he was to just up and invite her along, it would be inviting either her exasperation or her anger, and if she felt she was being pitied, it might become an issue of wounded pride.

He had to find some sort of pretext. Lawrence put his mind to work harder than he ever did while plying his trade and finally came up with something that he thought might work.

Lawrence coughed again, then spoke. "There are places on the

road to the village where wild dogs have started to appear. It'll be dangerous come nightfall. So if you wouldn't mind..." He paused and checked Holo's reaction.

She was still looking down at her hands, but he detected little of the loneliness from before.

"...I would very much appreciate your help."

Lawrence emphasized the *very much* and could not help but notice Holo's ears twitch at the words.

But she did not immediately answer, probably thanks to her pride as a wisewolf. No doubt she considered it beneath her dignity to wag her tail and happily reply to the words for which she had been hoping.

Holo sighed a long-suffering sigh, gathering her tail up in her arms and giving it a long stroke. Then, when she finally did look up at him, her upturned gaze gave Lawrence the briefest vision of a mightily put-upon princess.

"Must I?" she said.

It seemed she wanted Lawrence to truly insist upon her presence. Either that, or she was simply amusing herself by watching him fold.

This was Lawrence's own fault for leaving her alone. The fault was his to bear.

"I need this favor of you," he said still more desperately, and Holo had again turned away, her ears twitching again.

Holo lightly raised her hand to her mouth and coughed, probably to disguise the laugh that threatened to burst out. "Very well, I suppose," she said with a sigh, then glanced back at her companion.

Craftsmen were acknowledged as such because they finished the job down to the last knot. Lawrence pushed his exasperation and amusement down and responded with a wide smile. "Thank you!"

At this finally, Holo let slip a guffaw.



"Aye," she said ticklishly, nodding her head. It was proof she was truly pleased.

In any case, he had managed the tightrope walk across Holo's foul temper. He heaved a sigh and removed his coat and belt. Ordinarily, he would have folded his coat over the back of the chair, but he lacked the energy to even do that much. What he wanted to do most of all was to become horizontal and go to sleep.

And in just a moment that pleasure would be his.

Lawrence's mind was halfway to the land of sleep when Holo stood and spoke. "Just what are you doing?"

He was unsure whether the sudden darkness in his vision was because he had closed his eyes or not. "Uhn?"

"Come, now that I'm coming along there's no need for rest. We haven't any time for dawdling."

Lawrence rubbed his eyes and willed them open, then looked up at Holo. She was busily putting on her hooded coat.

Surely this was a joke.

He was not angry so much as aghast while he watched Holo prepare. Her innocent smile struck him as cruel, her happily swishing tail as terrifying. She finished dressing, then approached him with that same smile.

She has to be joking. She has to be, Lawrence prayed to himself, but Holo continued to approach.

"Come, let us go," she said, taking the prone Lawrence's hand and trying to pull him to his feet.

But even Lawrence had his limits. Almost unconsciously, he brushed her off. "Please, have some mercy, I'm not a cart horse—"

The moment he said it, he knew he had blundered, and he looked up at Holo to see her reaction.

But having been brushed off, Holo was simply looking back down at him with a mischievous smile on her face.

"Aye. That's true."

Lawrence wondered if she was angry, but then Holo sat herself down next to him on the bed. "Heh. Did you suppose I was angry?" Her delighted expression made it clear her goal all along had been to rile him.

In other words, he had been made sport of.

"You imagine that resting now will let you earn more efficiently at night, when traffic is lighter?" It was easy enough to discern as much, watching the comings and goings out the window for as long as Holo had.

Lawrence nodded, his eyes pleading with her to let him sleep.

"And that is why you are a fool, then." She grabbed hold of his beard and tugged his head to and fro. He was so sleepy and exhausted that it actually felt nice.

"You carried loads all night, napped in the driver's seat, left without even having breakfast with me, worked until just now, and made—what, seven pieces?"

"... That's right."

"I remember well enough that there are thirty-five *trenni* to a *lumione*, which leaves how much time until you've made enough to buy the honeyed peach preserves?"

It was a sum even a child could do. Lawrence answered, "Four days."

"Mm. Too much time. And moreover"—she ignored his attempt to interrupt—"the loading dock is a madhouse. Do you suppose you're the only one who's had the notion to give up, rest, and return in the evening?"

Holo made a proud expression, and beneath her hood, her ears twitched. No doubt from here her ears could hear all the conversations around the loading dock.

"Is everybody else thinking the same thing...?"

"Aye. It'll be just as bad come night. The dockhands themselves

need rest, too. And if you're already so profoundly exhausted, consider five days of this? No doubt you'll need more rest, and it will be more like seven or eight."

Lawrence had the feeling her estimate was more or less accurate. He nodded vaguely, and she lightly poked his head.

In his state, he could not even summon the energy to oppose this attack. As he lay faceup on the bed, he moved only his eyes over to regard the girl.

"What should we do?"

"First, pray the honeyed peach preserves don't sell."

Lawrence closed his eyes. "And next?" he asked, already half-asleep.

"Think of a different business."

"...A different...?" When so much money could be earned simply hauling cargo, it was foolish to contemplate anything else, Lawrence thought in the darkness. But in the instant before his consciousness faded entirely, Holo's voice reached his ears.

"I've heard the chatter here. If you were going to use me to scatter the wild dogs anyway, there's a much better way to make money. You see..."

As he slept, Lawrence calculated the potential profits.

At the stables, Lawrence rented a two-wheeled cart.

It had a smaller bed and a more cramped driver's seat, but it was lighter and thus could be pulled more quickly than his wagon.

Next, he collected rope, blankets, baskets, a bit of board, and a good amount of small coins.

Having done all this, Lawrence pulled the cart around to a certain building, whereupon the shopkeeper came running out as though he'd been waiting.

"Ah, I've been waiting! You got them?"

"Aye, and you?"

"Everything's ready. Honestly, I thought you were nothing more than other travelers when you came knocking on my door so early this morning—never thought you'd ask for such work." The man who laughed heartily was an innkeeper, though his apron was messy with oil and bread crumbs. "I hear you went to the bakers with your request last night. Reckon any craftsman that ends up rising earlier than a priest'll be none too happy about it!"

He guffawed as he spoke, then turned around to face his inn and beckoned someone out. Two apprentices emerged, unsteady with the weight of a large pot.

"That'll be enough for fifty people all together. When I sent the lads to the butchers', he wanted to know just how many people were staying at my place!"

"I truly appreciate it on such short notice. My thanks," said Lawrence.

"It's nothing. The guild dictates how much money we can make with its rules—if this helps me make a little more, it's a cheap favor indeed."

The two apprentices set the cauldron in the small cart bed and tied it down with the rope. In the cauldron was roast mutton with plenty of garlic, and Lawrence could still hear the fat bubbling.

The next item brought over was the large basket, which contained a heap of notched loaves of bread. Next came two full casks of middling wine.

With all this, the two-wheeled cart was fully loaded. With the help of the innkeeper, Lawrence secured the load with rope. The cart horse looked back at them, which probably was not a coincidence.

I have to haul all this? is no doubt what it would have said, if it could speak.

"Still, to take the money, even with this much preparation...

well," said the innkeeper deliberately, once he had finished counting up the remainder of the payment for the food. He gave his apprentices a few of the more worn coins—perhaps he always did as much when he had an unexpected little windfall like this. They returned to the inn delighted.

"Will you really be all right?" he asked. "The road to Le Houaix cuts right alongside the forest."

"When you say the forest, you're talking about the wolves and wild dogs, I suppose?"

"That's right. The Ohm Company built that road in a hurry to take materials to Le Houaix. All the dogs there came from the city, so they've no fear of humans. To be honest, it seems dangerous to carry something that smells so delicious right through that. I'll bet there were others who thought to do the same thing but gave up, owing to the danger and all."

Lawrence thought back to the conversation that Holo had overheard from her room. If something could be done about the wolves, then there was money to be made selling food and water in Le Houaix, where there was more demand than supply.

"Ha-ha. It'll be all right," said Lawrence with a smile, looking at the two-wheeled cart.

There was someone covering its cargo with wooden boards. Someone slight, delicate, with a casually tied skirt from which seemed to peek a furred sash or lining of some kind. Once she was finished securing the boards, that girl sat atop them with a satisfied smile on her face.

When the innkeeper noticed what Lawrence was looking at, Lawrence smiled. "They put a goddess of good fortune on the prow of a ship to guard against sea devils and disasters. She's mine."

"Oh ho...but still, against those dogs?" said the innkeeper doubtfully, but Lawrence only gave him a confident nod and said no more.

Running an inn, the innkeeper had surely seen people from many different regions employ many different good-luck charms. Lawrence would probably be fine admitting to it, so long as he avoided making any offerings to frogs or snakes.

And since he had already given the innkeeper himself a nice offering in the form of some lucrative side business, the man had no reason to complain.

"May God's blessing go with you," said the innkeeper as he took a couple of steps back from the cart.

"My thanks, truly. Oh, and—"

"Yes?"

Lawrence jumped up onto the driver's seat of the cart before he spoke. Two-wheeled carts were not especially rare, but that changed when there was a fetching lass in the cart bed. Passersby stared curiously, and children running in the streets waved innocently to Holo as though she was part of some festival.

"I may come again in the evening for the same order."

The innkeeper's lips went round, and he then smiled a toothy smile. "My inn's full up, so I've plenty of help. The guild rules don't say anything about putting your guests to work!" he said with a laugh.

"We'll be off, then."

"And good travels to you!"

With a *clop-clop*, the cart began to move.

Moving through the town's morning congestion involved much horse stopping and direction changing, and with only two wheels, it was more effort for the cart's passenger to stay mounted. Every time the cart swayed, Holo would have to take pains not to fall as she shouted her dismay, but eventually they made it to the outskirts of the town—to the wider world that was a two-wheeled cart's natural environment.

"Now then, are you prepared for this?"

Lawrence's question was answered with a nod from Holo, who leaned forward from her sitting position to drape her arms around his neck from behind. "I'm the faster one, you know. A horse's speed is nothing to mine."

"Yes, but that's when you're on your own feet."

Normally, it was Lawrence who clung to Holo. Similarly, when in business, it was nerve-racking to conduct a trade with someone else's money.

Holo snuggled her arms around Lawrence and rested her chin on his shoulder. "Well, I'd best hold on tight, then, hadn't I? Just as you always do—desperately, trying to keep from crying."

"Come on, I don't cry..."

"Heh-heh-heh." The breath from Holo's snigger tickled Lawrence's ear.

He sighed a long-suffering sigh. "I won't stop even if you do cry."

"As though I'd—!" Holo's words after that were cut off by the sound of the reins smacking against the cart horse's backside as Lawrence gave them a snap.

The horse began to run and the two wheels to turn.

The question of whether Holo had or had not cried would surely be a source of many quarrels to come.

The road could be summarized with the word *bracing.*

A two-wheeled cart was very limited in the amount of cargo it could carry, and it was far less stable than a wagon with four wheels. But in exchange, its speed was a beautiful thing.

Lawrence did not often use a cart, but it was perfect for the needs of the moment, when he wanted to transport the food while it was still hot. As he sat in the driver's seat gripping the reins, it felt as though he were controlling the landscape itself as it rushed by.

Holo had clung to Lawrence nervously at first, but very quickly she became used to the accommodations. By the time they neared the forest, Holo was content to hold on to Lawrence's shoulders with her hands, standing in the cart bed and letting the air rush over her as she laughed.

Given the rumors of wild dogs, the other travelers on the road mostly kept their eyes warily downcast, and a few of them had swords drawn and ready. To see a girl laughing so merrily in a two-wheeler, they must've felt ridiculous for being so terrified of anything like a dog.

The faces of the people they passed lit up as they went by, and they would raise their hands and wave. It happened more than a few times that Holo would reach up to return their waves and in the process nearly lose her balance and fall from the wagon. Each time, she would end up having to half strangle Lawrence's neck to keep her grip, but her snickering made it difficult for Lawrence to feel much alarm.

Given her lively good cheer, it was no wonder the wolf had been so enraged to spend her day locked up in a room.

As they went, a howl sounded from within the forest, and everyone on the road froze and looked to the trees.

Then Holo howled herself, as though she had been waiting for that moment, and everyone turned and looked at her in shock.

They seemed to realize the extent of their own cowardice, and as though to admit the rightness of the girl's courage in the cart, they all howled with her.

Lawrence and Holo arrived in the village of Le Houaix after a trip that could never have been so enjoyable taken alone.

The throng of people assembled there all gazed in curiosity at this cart, which contained not waterwheel parts but casks, a blanket-wrapped cauldron, and atop all those, a girl. Lawrence stopped their vehicle amid the gazes, then helped Holo

to the ground. She seemed so pleased he would've been unsurprised to hear the *swish-swish* of her tail wagging. He left her in charge of setting up while he went off to find and negotiate with the manager of the village. He finished by pressing several silver coins into the man's hand, and in exchange, he received permission to sell food in the village since the workers were so busy with work they did not even have time to fetch water from the river.

No sooner had Lawrence and Holo begun to sell slices of meat sandwiched between bread than people started to crowd around—not just merchants who had failed to bring food, fearful of what might emerge from the forest to take it, but also ordinary villagers.

"Hey, you there! Don't crowd! Line up properly!"

They were slicing the already thinly sliced meat in two, then selling it between pieces of bread. That was all, but they were still too busy for any amount of politeness. The cause of this was the wine they had brought, thinking they would be able to sell it at a fine price. Portioning it out took extra time and effort—more than twice as much. Lawrence had done this sort of thing once or twice before but had totally forgotten about that little fact.

They'd managed to sell about half of what they had brought when a man who looked to be a carpenter approached them from behind. "My comrades have been toiling away on empty stomachs," he said.

Holo was originally a wolf-god of wheat and was thus always sensitive to manners of food. She looked at Lawrence, wordlessly insisting that they assist.

There was yet meat in the cauldron. Traffic continued to stream into the village, so if he stayed where he was, he would sell out before long.

Lawrence was a merchant and was happy as long as his wares sold. There seemed to him little point in moving just to accomplish the same task—but then he changed his mind.

Given the people going back and forth between the village and the trading company, news of the business he and Holo were doing was bound to spread. They would do well to expand their market by selling a bit of food to the craftsmen.

Lawrence sank into silence as he thought it over but was brought back to his senses by Holo stepping slightly on his foot.

"Why, aren't you making a cunning face?" she said.

"I am a merchant, after all. Right," said Lawrence. He finished placing a slice of meat between pieces of bread and handing the sandwich to a customer, then put the cauldron's lid back on top of it and turned to the craftsman. "I've enough left for twenty men, say. Will that do?"

The craftsmen working alongside the river were like ravenous wolves.

The Ohm Company, which had taken on the construction project thanks to their boundless lust for money, had hired these craftsmen but failed to provide food or lodging for them, so the men had gotten by on nothing but an evening meal provided by the villagers out of pure kindness.

Moreover, since the work was paid piecemeal and done on a deadline, the workers were reluctant to take the time to go all the way back to the village for a meal. Even once they became aware of Lawrence and Holo's arrival at the mill, they regarded them with only a brief, sad glare before turning their attention back to their work. The ones working on the wheelhouse's axles or interior did not even show their faces.

Lawrence carried the wine cask, and Holo pulled one of the small handcarts the local women used to move heavy loads,

which in turn was loaded with the cauldron and bread basket. They shared a glance.

Evidently they would be peddling the food on foot.

"What, that all? It won't be near enough!" So said everyone they sold bread to, but the complaint always came with a smile.

Apart from those who made their living under a workshop's roof, any carpenter was happy to brag about the terrible conditions under which he'd worked. So while each and every one of them had to be famished, none demanded a greater share of meat or bread.

Far from it—they asked Lawrence to give food to as many men as he could manage. It was impossible to build a great water mill alone, and if even one man fell it would be trouble for all, they said. Holo had spent so much time watching the workers in her wheat fields that she seemed to empathize with this.

But she did not just empathize—she seemed to take great pleasure in bantering with the workers, and Lawrence could hardly fail to notice her ladling out extragenerous servings of wine.

Of course, he said nothing.

"Two pieces of bread here, please!" came a shouted call from one of the millhouses that already housed a millstone.

It was covered in fine powder, but the stuff was not flour—it was sawdust from the wood that they were, even then, in the midst of cutting.

Holo sneezed several times and decided to wait outside the shack. Perhaps her excellent sense of smell made her that much more sensitive.

Lawrence sliced off two pieces of bread, then ascended the steeply rising stairs.

They creaked alarmingly as he went, and there was not much room between his head and the ceiling. The men there were

covered in sawdust and were fighting with files and saws to get the axle gearing to properly mesh.

"I've brought the bread!"

A watermill could be surprisingly loud, and it was—all the more so in the small shack, with the creaking and groaning of the turning axle.

Yet at Lawrence's yell, the two men suddenly looked up at him and rushed at him with surprising alacrity.

Holo laughed at him when Lawrence later told her he was afraid he would be knocked back down the stairs.

When Lawrence sighed because he wished she would be a little more worried about him, Holo slowly and gently brushed the sawdust from his face and smiled.

The wheel turned, rising, then falling, then rising again.

Holo was like a waterwheel, like a mallet, and Lawrence was easily undone by her.

"Well, I think we've about made the rounds."

"I'd think so. Dividing the meat and bread in half we managed to get to most everybody."

Holo pulled the cart that was carrying the wine cask and cauldron, and on her chest was a wooden pendant, carved in the shape of a hare, that one of the carpenters had given her.

"I'd like to head straight back to the village, put in another order, and see if we can't double our business by noon tomorrow."

"Mm. Still, how much did we make in the end?"

"Well, now...wait just a moment..." Lawrence counted the various costs on his fingers, and the figure he arrived at was surprisingly low. "Around four *trenni* at best, after we change the money."

"Only four? But we sold so much!"

It was true that Lawrence's coin purse was heavy with coppers,

but poor-quality coppers were never going to amount to much, no matter how many you had.

"I'd feel better pushing prices higher if we were selling to greedy merchants, but the craftsmen aren't making that much. So that's how it is."

Given that Holo was the one who had suggested selling food to the craftsmen, she could not very well argue with this and pulled her chin in with irritation.

Of course, doing business that people were so grateful to receive came with benefits other than money. Even when profit margins were slim and the dangers great, Lawrence could rarely resist the trade routes to lonely villages since he could never forget how it felt to bring the villagers what they needed.

Lawrence put his hand on Holo's head and patted it a bit roughly. "Still, we'll bring double the food tomorrow and turn double the profit. If we make arrangements ahead, we'll be able to sell at night, too, which will double our profit again. We'll have those honeyed peach preserves before you know it."

Holo nodded at Lawrence's words, and her stomach growled almost in time with her nod.

Her ears twitched ticklishly under his hand, and Lawrence pulled away. He could not very well pretend not to have heard the growl, so he just gave an honest chuckle.

Holo made ready to play-punch Lawrence's arm, but just before she did, Lawrence's stomach itself growled with fortuitous timing.

Their constant struggle to keep up with sales of meat and bread had kept their hunger at bay, but now it seemed to have returned with a vengeance. Lawrence met Holo's eyes. He smiled at her again, and Holo's angry expression immediately softened.

Lawrence glanced about their surroundings, then reached for the cart.

"What is it?" Holo asked.

"Oh, nothing," said Lawrence. He removed the cauldron's lid, pulled out the last slice of meat sticking to the inside, along with a nearly crumbled piece of bread. "I saved this. Thought we could eat it on the way back."

Normally Lawrence sold everything that could be sold, and when he was hungry ate anything he could find that seemed edible. He'd never before considered saving a piece of salable product and eating it later.

Lawrence cut the meat with a greasy knife as Holo's tail wagged.

"Still, you."

"What?"

"You seem to have missed the crucial point again."

The cheap mutton was full of gristle, so cutting it took some time, but Lawrence finally looked back up at Holo. "The crucial point?"

"Mm. If you were planning all along to reveal this plan, you should've used nicer meat. This meat is merely adequate."

Apparently it had been too much to trust Holo to suffer through skipping lunch. Of course, it was very like her to have been watching for openings to secretly sneak bites of meat throughout the day.

Lawrence sighed. "I hadn't noticed," he said with a rueful smile.

He sliced the bread in two, put meat atop each, and then after a moment of indecision, he gave the larger piece to Holo.

Her tail was as honest as a puppy's, and somehow, so was her tongue. "I understand the carpenters' grumbling all too well now. This isn't nearly enough."

"You're certainly full of complaints. When I was just starting out, I'd eat buds and fruit seeds just to avoid starvation."

Holo bit noisily into the bread and meat, giving Lawrence nothing but an irritated glare, noisily chewing the bite she tore free.

Lawrence put his knife away, and after taking his own serving of bread and replacing the lids of the basket and cauldron, he returned to pulling the cart.

"And you're certainly full of elderly scolding," said Holo (of all things the things to say!) after she finished swallowing the bite.

If the centuries-old wisewolf was saying as much, then all was truly lost.

"It's only reasonable to want to eat more and tastier food. Just as trees wish to grow up and out."

Even rank sophistry like this sounded more or less reasonable when Holo said it, which was patently unfair.

Though she'd eaten the first half of her food in the first bite, the greedy Holo seemed not to want to finish so quickly and instead contented herself to nibble at what remained.

Lawrence watched this childish display and could not help asking, "So you were that hungry, eh?"

If all he had given her were those words, he probably would have gotten an angry glare for his trouble. But her look was more doubtful than angry, since as he spoke, he offered her a new piece of bread.

"God says to share what you have, after all."

Holo looked at him steadily for a moment, then finally popped the rest of her share into her mouth. The bread in Lawrence's hand disappeared moments later.

"Mmph... Sometimes even you... mm... manage to act like a proper male."

Watching Holo talk as she devoured the sandwich half, perhaps wanting the fresher loaf as quickly as possible, was quite enough to make Lawrence feel full.



He smiled as he remembered a certain old travelers' saying about food.

"Still, is this truly all right?" asked Holo, holding the remaining bread in both hands.

Something about her posture made Lawrence doubt she would let the bread go in any case, but she had asked, so he had no choice but to answer. Just as he spoke, he realized what he said was connected to what Holo had said two days earlier.

"Sure, it's fine."

"Mm. Well, in that case..."

"I've already eaten quite enough."

Holo's mouth dropped open, and she froze, only her eyes swiveling to glare at Lawrence.

"What's the matter?" he asked, which made Holo's gaze flick this way and that, disturbed, before settling back on him, harsh.

"Oh, you've already eaten, have you? And here I thought you were being considerate for once...," she grumbled.

"Isn't this the time to put what you said before into action?" Lawrence responded.

"...Huh? Me? What are you..."

It was always Holo who was putting riddles to Lawrence. At seeing her confusion, Lawrence had to admit that he understood the appeal. He had always thought it was out of malice or mean-spiritedness, but having gotten a chance to try it himself, he finally saw why she enjoyed it so much. Holo had closed her mouth and looked back and forth between the bread and Lawrence's face, confused.

The only thing that would have made this better would have been a bit of wine, but the water he'd have drunk to clear his head afterward would have probably been poisoned.

Lawrence decided the timing was right, and quoted the old travelers' maxim:

"For tasty food, double the money. To be full, double the amount. So what do you do to double the pleasure of a meal?" Lawrence remembered the riddle Holo had posed to him while she had gazed at the whole roast pig. He smiled and continued, "You add a companion to dine with. Just watching you enjoy the bread is satisfaction enough for me."

He smiled, and Holo looked down, probably more than a little abashed. Of course Lawrence had not intended to attack her, and he truly was content to watch her relish the bread so.

So instead of telling her to eat up and not worry, he teasingly patted her head.

Holo brushed his hand away and held hers out instead. "Do you suppose I could eat the whole loaf after hearing such a thing?" In her hand was a torn-off piece of the bread.

It was not precisely divided, but rather hastily torn in Holo's earnest effort to compromise—which was somehow very like her.

If she really wanted to eat the whole loaf of bread, he did not much mind, but still—!

Lawrence was about to say so, but Holo picked that moment to tease him. "'Twould be an annoyance indeed, to let you have all the fun of indulging."

Lawrence had been ready to reassure Holo that she need not worry about eating all the bread, but now she had done the same thing to him.

"Or do you only care about yourself?"

She was a wisewolf and not only in name.

If he turned her down, it would be proof of his selfishness.

Lawrence gratefully accepted the piece she had so begrudgingly torn off her loaf and bowed. "My thanks."

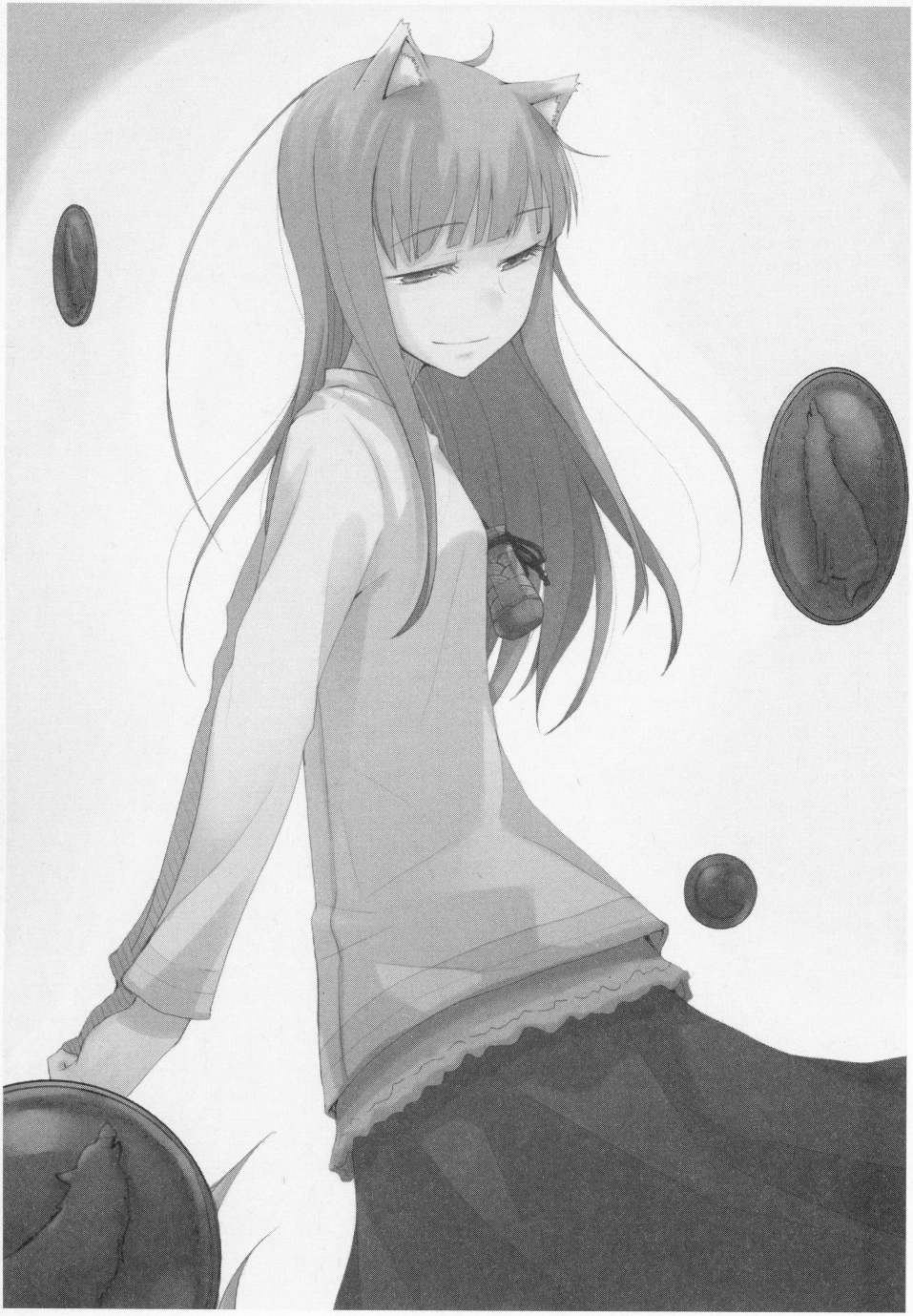
"Mm." Holo gave a superior nod, her chest puffed out. She bit into her own bread as though this entire exchange were beneath her dignity.

Lawrence, too, ate his bread, then brushed his hands free of the crumbs that lingered.

Holo then grabbed his hand with hers, as though she had been waiting for just that moment.

He was surprised, but not surprised enough to do anything as stupid as looking at her. He smiled wordlessly and squeezed her hand in response.

It was a pleasant winter's afternoon, and the only sound was the rattling of the cart.



The Wolf And The Twilight-Colored Gift

The towns and villages one encountered while traveling were places where a brief, precious rest could be had and necessary supplies gathered.

These were not limited to food and fuel. Components for repairing the wagon and mending clothes were necessary, as well as information on the condition and security of the road ahead.

The more people were traveling, the more things were required and the more work there was to do.

This was doubly true when one's companion was a selfish princess.

He had come to buy the firewood that was absolutely necessary for keeping warm while making camp on the road, but she merely furrowed her brow.

"...'Tis your coin. Spend it as you will."

Had she ended her sentence with a rising, interrogative tone, Lawrence could have at least enjoyed being charmingly deceived, but her flatly stated remark gave a rather different impression.

Lawrence found this surprising, but there was no reason to doubt that Holo, his traveling companion, would speak words that were utterly contrary to her true feelings.

"Does it bother you?"

"Not particularly," said Holo shortly, looking away. She had a kerchief over her head and a cape about her shoulders, a fox-fur muffler around her neck, and gloves of deerskin—every inch the town lass. Moreover, from beneath her kerchief and down her back flowed a fall of beautiful chestnut hair that would have been the envy of any noblewoman. She had beauty that caught the eye of nearly every passerby.

A poet might say that a girl in her teens was at her loveliest, but Lawrence knew the truth of the matter.

Holo was not a town lass, she was not a girl in her teens, and in point of fact was not even a human. Removing her kerchief would reveal wolf ears and beneath her robe was a magnificent tail.

She was a being who had lived in the wheat and ensured its good harvest, and long ago people had revered her as a god. She was centuries old, and her true form was that of a giant wolf.

She was Holo, the Wisewolf of Yoitsu.

Holo thrust out her chest and proclaimed both those names at every opportunity, which only made Lawrence sigh. Calling her a wisewolf always made him feel rather small inside.

"It's not such a great distance to the next town, and it shouldn't be too cold. You can manage a couple of days of cold food, can't you?"

"I told you, spend it as you will."

"..."

Lawrence and Holo were standing in a shop that sold the fuel travelers needed to provide light and warmth. It was not only travelers, either—all sorts bought the firewood stacked high in front of the shop, as well as the product next to it, which sold as though it would not be outdone.

It was true, though, that compared with firewood it gave a

weaker flame, and there was the smell to consider. Given how much more sensitive Holo's nose was than a human's, it was no small burden for her to bear.

But—it was so cheap.

Merchants would blind themselves to almost anything if it was cheap enough—yes, and plug their noses, too.

What was it that Holo found distasteful? And what was so much cheaper than firewood? Peat.

"So, what'll it be, sir? I can't have you loitering around my shop all day." The shopkeeper laid a hand on his woodpile beneath the eaves and smiled a rueful smile.

He seemed half-sympathetic to Lawrence's problem with this finicky traveling companion and half-amused at Lawrence getting what he deserved.

Lawrence himself had felt that way at various points during his travels alone, so he could hardly blame the man. Traveling with a girl as fetching as Holo often earned him the envy of others. If the envy became too much of a problem, though, Lawrence would not be able to make his way as a merchant, so it would not do to appear self-satisfied—especially not when dealing with a nasty fellow like this, who would obviously take special pleasure in watching Lawrence squirm.

Faced with the prideful Holo, arms folded and back to him, looking for all the world like some spoiled noble lady, Lawrence had no choice but to set aside the matter of the fuel.

"My apologies. I'll come again."

"Come anytime," replied the shopkeeper in a flat tone. Only the words themselves were polite. It reminded him of Holo.

Holo, meanwhile, seemed to recover her good cheer as soon as they left the shop. "Food next, aye? Hurry, let us go!" she said, taking Lawrence's hand and tugging on it as she strode ahead.

From the outside, it would have looked like a traveling

merchant had lucked into the attentions of a town lass, but Lawrence only sighed his usual sigh.

When it came to food, convincing Holo of anything was no simple matter—nothing so easy as the argument about fuel.

"'Tis written all over your face, you know," Holo said with a sly grin, and at the sight of the amber eyes that flashed at him from her upturned gaze, he could not help but stop in his tracks.

This wolf saw through everything.

"The next town will be bigger, I hear. I've no intention of insisting on luxury here."

"Which means you'll be insisting on luxury in the next town."

Holo grinned, flashing her teeth, to which Lawrence had no reply.

Either way it would be a battle, so he decided to simply follow Holo's lead this time. "Well, then, I'll gladly accept your thrift."

"Mm."

For bread, they bought rye instead of wheat, and cheap rye at that, bread that had been bulked up with legumes and chestnut flour. For vegetables, it was turnips and carrots, along with roasted beans. They had their wineskin filled with wine that was not very good, but at least had a good deal of clarity.

It was more reserved than their usual fare, but still cost more than the rock-hard oat bread and sour, pulpy wine Lawrence had eaten in the past.

As Lawrence was doing the buying, he noticed Holo gazing at the dried fruit and roasted seeds. Thinking he had best hurry up before Holo begged him for something else, he handed the shopkeeper a blackened silver coin and received a few coppers in change—and then remembered something.

"Ah, pardon me—might I have the change in those coppers there instead?"

"Those? Oh, the *schmie* coppers? Passing through the northern forest, are you?"

"Yes. There's a logging village on the way, if I remember right."

There were many varieties of the copper coins necessary to buy supplies on the road. As to why that mattered—well, one had only to imagine trying to use one town's coin in a rival town during a feud.

"It's probably too small to even be called a village, but this time of year there'll be more people there, just trying to finish their work before the snows come. Anyhow, this is the exchange rate."

Anyone making their living by trade needed to have a grasp of the many—even dozens—of coins that circulated through the money changers.

This particular exchange rate was slightly unfavorable, but Lawrence still would not be taking a loss.

He agreed to the exchange and accepted the *schmie* coppers, which were smaller but thicker, before putting the shop behind him.

"You merchants are a troublesome lot," said Holo once they'd left.

Lawrence put his hand on Holo's head. "Not so troublesome as you. Now then, we'll see to repairing the wagon and gathering some talk about the road ahead..." He ticked off the tasks on his fingers.

Holo looked up at him, childlike. If he ignored her, she would be angry.

Lawrence slumped and gave in. "Yes, and dinner, too."

"Mm. Nothing like a tavern for hearing about travel conditions. 'Tis a necessary thing."

It was hard to argue with a wisewolf.

Lawrence ascended the inn's stairs just as some other travelers were coming down. A man tipped his hat in greeting and gave Lawrence a smile of pained sympathy.

The reason for that smile was quite obvious.

The sun had not even set yet, but Holo's face was quite red as Lawrence carried her.

"How many times do you suppose I've carried a certain wise-wolf away after she's eaten and drunk too much, hmm?"

"Ungh..."

"You're lucky I don't make a hobby of usury, else you wouldn't even have the clothes on your back."

With effort, he managed to drag Holo back to the room. He laid her on the bed and removed her kerchief and cloak, as had become the usual routine. He was so efficient at it, who would blame him for stripping her naked? Though the thought had occurred to Lawrence several times, he had never once done it.

After all, as she groaned and lay back, Holo's face was the very image of satiety.

"Honestly," Lawrence murmured with a smile. A caress of her cheek with his finger was all the satisfaction he needed.

"Now then." They'd arrived early in the town, and as a result, Holo was passed out from drunkenness earlier than usual. It was still light outside, and with the wooden windows left open, there was light enough to work without candles.

Lawrence set his knife, coin purse, and map on the desk and lazily went about his work.

First came an inspection of his knife, making sure the blade was still keen and the hilt tight. It was mostly used for eating, but during a journey it might well need to cut a man's skin or kill an animal.

When it came to things that might save his life, it was not an exaggeration to rank the knife above any prayer to God.

As for whether his map was useful or not, it was only marginally better than wearing blinders, but there was nothing to be lost in having even a vague sense of one's physical surroundings.

Especially given that tomorrow they would be passing through a forest that would obscure their view of the horizon.

Lawrence knew from past experience that just having Holo the Wisewolf with him was not a guarantee of easy travel, but at least they would not have to worry about being attacked by wolves. Given that Holo's true wolf form could easily swallow him in a single gulp, with her at his side, there was no need to fear mere forest wolves.

That point did make him feel a bit better.

When he had traveled alone, whenever he had to pass through areas where wolves, bears, or other dangerous creatures frequently appeared, he carried every ward and charm he could possibly find.

It was said that animals hated the smell of metal, so he wore things made of lead on his body. Likewise it was said noise would keep them away, so he would ring a small bell all day long. He would make a generous tithe to the Church in exchange for a prayer on his behalf. He even ended up buying a charm bearing the name of a famous saint who was reputed to have given sermons to the wolves.

But no matter what he did, the wolves attacked when they pleased.

Despite all the hardship he had endured, Lawrence now found himself a bit saddened at not having to worry about such attacks anymore. Humans were strange creatures indeed.

Nevertheless, it would be best not to encounter them and not to rely overmuch on Holo. Holo, after all, seemed occasionally self-conscious about the fact that she was not human, so it would not do to just send her out to fend off any wolves that appeared.

Lawrence's attention now fell upon the contents of the open coin purse on the desk, which were the most representative of that which might be used to ward off wolves: The *schmie* copper

pieces, which he had received as change in his various transactions around town.

Small and thick, they were perfect for carving copper off their edges, but unlike other similar coins, whose designs would have been mostly filed off, these were largely intact.

The reason why was in the design of the *schmie* copper.

Lawrence separated one out from the rest and held it up in his hand, gazing at it. On the red metal disc was carved the image of a single beast.

"So you're collecting those now, are you?"

Lawrence nearly dropped the coin at the sudden voice. There had been no footsteps nor other signals that she was so close.

Holo burped a wine-soaked burp and draped herself over Lawrence's back.

"I see you've finally recognized how wonderful I am, then. Mm. Aye, 'tis well."

"Yes, yes, fine. Hey, look out—!"

Lawrence reached out and grabbed the wobbling Holo's hand, and she smiled, pleased.

Even when she was drunk, Lawrence could not help but redden a bit, when smiled at thusly by a girl like Holo.

"So, what—you need water?"

"Mm... my throat burns..."

It was the usual routine. Lawrence stood from his chair, letting Holo sit instead while he brought her a pitcher of water.

He handed it to her, and she drank noisily, a trickle of water spilling from the corner of her mouth.

Holo claimed that wolves did not have cheeks and that she spilled because she had yet to become accustomed to her human mouth, but Lawrence doubted that. She was probably merely coarse.

"Whew..." She burped again.

"Feel better?"

"Mm... 'Twas awfully strong wine, I think. My throat is yet dry," she said and began to drink again. She was spilling a truly terrible amount.

Lawrence felt like her footman as he offered her a handkerchief, but then he realized something—they had added a large amount of ginger to the wine, in order to cover up its poor quality.

"Even if you were to order finer wine, it would be a waste if you spilled it like that," Lawrence said, and Holo gave him a look that made him wonder if she had long since gotten over her drunkenness. But then the corner of her mouth curled up. She declined to engage further.

"Come, if you're feeling better, then move aside. It's dark, and I need to light a candle."

Holo glanced back and forth between Lawrence and the desk, then grudgingly stood. However, she seemed to have no intention of returning to the bed, instead sitting herself on the corner of the desk. "What are you doing? Are you insinuating something, huh?"

"What, do you want me to tell you it must be your conscience panging that makes you think so?"

"Hmph. Well, aren't I a good-for-nothing glutton." She took another drink from the water jug, then poked him in the temple with it.

He took it without argument and set it on the table. There was no one as unpleasant as a spiteful drunk. Especially when the drunk in question was such a good actor there was no way to be sure just how drunk she was—pursuing conversation with such a person was tantamount to suicide.

Lawrence turned his attention back to the coins before he could blunder into any of her traps.

"We'll be passing through a village of woodcutters tomorrow. These are to sell there."

"...Sell?" Holo gave him a dubious look, not unfairly.

After all, it was a copper coin that was on the table—coin used to buy, not sell.

"That's right. Sell."

"But...this is currency, is it not?"

"You can sell currency. In the old days...maybe not as old as you, but still old, coins were sold by smiths, who were side by side with the money changers."

Holo's eyes were still bleary with wine, but her interest was piqued, and she picked up one of the copper coins to regard it.

"Coins issued by legendary kings or coins circulated near abbeys where saints renowned for their healing powers lived. Coins with holes in them such that they can be strung and worn about the neck are common, too. I've even heard of coins being used as hilts on swords."

The coin Holo held had a ship and a tower carved on it and was from a seaside kingdom. She looked at the obverse and the reverse sides both, holding each up to her chest experimentally.

"That's a bit small for that—coins made to wear tend to be larger. For you...one about this size would be good, I think."

Lawrence picked out a coin of about the right size and held it up to Holo's chest. It was an unremarkable piece of faded silver, but strangely, it looked more like an antique piece of silversmithing when worn by Holo.

Clothes make the man, the old saying went, but in this girl's case the opposite was true—she made anything look good.

"Heh. So, might we put a hole in this?" Holo burbled as she held the piece up.

Lawrence agonized for a moment but then hardened his heart and took the coin back. "If we do that, it'll be useless as currency."

"Hmph."

"You've got that precious wheat about your neck anyway, don't you? You can't wear a coin with that."

Holo looked forlornly at the coin Lawrence had taken back. "Huh?" she asked, her head tilted in confusion.

"There's a scripture that prohibits usury. It says the practice is like sowing coins into a field."

Despite her confused look, Holo was still a wisewolf. As soon as she began to think it over, she assumed an air of intellectualism. But the wine caught up to her, and she soon surrendered. "...What does that mean?"

"Coins will not send up shoots, nor blossom into flowers. Moreover, they're metal, so they'll poison the soil and make everything else planted there wither. In other words, it prohibits collecting interest and speaks to the evil of money."

"Mm." The wolf ears on her head flicked rapidly, and Holo nodded, seeming to accept this explanation. "I can't have the wheat withering, can I?"

Lawrence had also thought about how it would look on her already-thin physique but had not mentioned that. He only had one life, after all.

"So why will we be able to sell these coins in particular, then?" Holo pointed at the *schmie* coppers with their wolf designs.

"These? Well..." Lawrence found himself stumbling over his words. But he quickly recovered and gave a good merchant's answer. "The wolf device on them, you see."

"Oh? Why's that, I suppose. It does seem quite clever." Holo said, pleased, as she picked one of the coins up and turned it over in her palm.

Her good mood did not seem to be from the wine. She did seem very amused by the image of the wolf. And why not? Surely

a lonely traveler, far from their home, would be heartened to chance upon a coin with a famous figure from their homeland carved upon its face.

But Lawrence remained purposefully vague. She was so happy, sitting there on the desk with her tail swishing back and forth. There was no need to say it.

"Come, you. What is it?"

The question put Lawrence in a difficult place.

"Courage, perhaps? Or... good fortune? No, this is wolves like me, so..." Holo considered the various possibilities herself.

He could not tell her. He could not tell her that it was a ward *against* wolves.

"Hmm. And didn't you say that you'll be able to sell them in a woodcutters' village?"

"Y-yes, that's right."

"Which means...," Holo mused, sinking into her own thoughts as a person sinks into water.

Lawrence could only look away and close his eyes. Her second name, Wisewolf, was not merely for show, and as he expected, she seemed to have realized the truth.

Holo's tail stopped in place, and she placed the coin she had been playing with back down on the desk.

"...Mm. Well, I figured 'twas something of the sort," she said, seemingly out of consideration for Lawrence.

As though admitting that wolves and humans could not help but be enemies.

"I mean, look, there are bandit ward coins, too, so—"

"Come, you," said Holo with a lonely sigh and momentary smile. "If you care so much, 'twill only make me feel lonelier," she said, hopping off the desk and returning to the bed. It was too late to say anything to her. Her body disappeared beneath the covers, followed by her tail.

Lawrence had been careless.

He should have known, he thought and sighed and began to place the sorted coins on the table into different bags.

The next moment, something came to him.

"Hey—that's right. Of course," he said, leaning back in the chair so that it balanced on its back legs. He looked back over his shoulder and saw Holo looking at him, apparently wondering what he was talking about.

"Come to think of it, with you along, don't you suppose we could make a killing on wolf wards?"

Occasionally stubbornness led to a certain wry smile. But a smile was a smile, and sometimes that was enough to clear the skies.

Holo's ears twitched. "So," she said, turning over in bed to face him. "What did you have in mind?"

While she could be even more childish and selfish than she looked, she offered Lawrence such a gracious chance to redeem himself that even he could not let it slip away.

No one had a better traveling companion than he did.

"Well, say...," Lawrence said, his gaze flitting away. "Maybe one could make some noise that would drive them away...?"

"Sometimes high-pitched noises are unpleasant for us...but that's just as likely to attract their attention as it is to drive wolves away."

She had a very straightforward point of view.

"What about prayers to God, then?"

"Aye, surely, if that god will give them food every day."

"What about the talk that they can't stand the smell of metal?"

"Metal..." Holo sat up as though they had finally hit upon something worth debating. She closed her eyes and tilted her head. "That might have some effect."

"So a leaden apron might work, then?" Lawrence had seen craftsmen wearing such things.

"Hmmm."

"I've often heard that knights or mercenaries wearing armor are difficult to attack."

"That's because of the long spears they carry, though, aye? Those are troublesome even for me. But swords—sometimes I don't even notice if they're carrying swords before I leap."

Every one of her answers was completely reasonable.

Lawrence gave the matter honest thought. "What about something that simply smells bad?"

"Aye. Herbs often have a bitter scent. That might be worst of all."

Several possible varieties of herbs flitted through Lawrence's mind. Some of them were quite cheap and might well do the trick.

Given the hour, the sun would soon be setting, but even if the spice shops were closing, their wares would be identifiable from the eaves simply by the scents they gave off.

"Shall we go out? You might walk off a bit of that wine."

"Mm. Right now?" Holo was surprised at first but soon changed her mind. "Aye, why not?"

"Right." Lawrence put his things in order and stood, and watching him, Holo smiled. A moment later, she climbed out of bed herself.

"But let's not hurry, eh?" said Holo as she took Lawrence's hand.

The western sky was red, but the east had already turned a dark blue. The passersby in the streets wore their scarves up around their mouths, bundled up tightly as they hurried to finish the day's business and head home.

The barmaid of the tavern, which Holo had been drinking and carousing at not long before, was just then hanging a tallow

lamp from the building's eaves; noticing Lawrence and Holo, she waved.

"..."

When Lawrence looked back at her, Holo's grip on his hand tightened a little—the usual joke. And anyway, the barmaid hardly had time to show a mere traveling merchant anything more than the usual pleasant greeting. Customers were arriving one after the other, and she hurried inside, as though someone in the building had called to her.

"If anything, I imagine she was greeting us thanks to your drinking habits," said Lawrence.

"Oh ho. Then she ought to have waved an empty glass instead of her hand."

"Does that mean I should've waved my lightened coin purse?"

"Heh-heh. Yes, just so."

Such was their banter as they walked through the twilight town.

Lawrence often found summer post-sunset hour to be excessively melancholy, and as such did not like it, but winter's was just the opposite.

The air was cool and dry, and being covered in the dust of a hard day's work, delicious food and drink surely awaited them in a warm room somewhere, one that glowed with lamplight. It was no different from Holo's thinking, and doubtless that feeling was what led her to drag them to taverns and loosen the strings of his coin purse.

Such thoughts occupied Lawrence's mind as he walked beside Holo, and eventually they came to a certain building. A signboard with an earthen mortar affixed to it hung from the eaves, indicating that it was an apothecary's shop.

In most towns, herbs and spices fell into the purview of the apothecary.

Various dried herbs of suspicious provenance hung from the eaves in bunches, and inside the cramped little shop were rows of baskets containing even more herbs.

But farther inside, the shopkeeper was bent over, tidying up after the day's business, and when he noticed Lawrence and Holo, his breath came out in a white puff as he smiled apologetically. "Customers, at this hour? I was just about to close up shop."

"Could we browse just a bit?"

"So long as you aren't long," replied the shopkeeper, arranging the small bottles and casks on a shelf.

"Thank you very much," said Lawrence with a smile.

Next to him, Holo waited for the shopkeeper to stick his nose back into the shelves before she whispered into Lawrence's ear, "He was looking at me as he said that."

"He probably thinks I'm some fool merchant a town girl has tricked into buying a scented sachet or some such thing." Lawrence shrugged, and Holo stifled a laugh.

"Even if it smells good, it still leaves your belly empty."

"I figured you'd say that."

As they chatted, they smelled each of the herbs lined up in front of the shop. Black herbs, blue herbs, deep green herbs, red herbs, yellow herbs. There were even some made from dried flowers or dried fruits, and many that, upon asking the shopkeeper their names, Lawrence discovered he had never heard of before.

For Holo's part, she delivered her opinions in turn as she sampled the scents. "Good for putting on tough meat. Good for putting in bad wine. Good for putting on burnt bread." Such harshly scented herbs as these were not good for improving the taste of good food so much as they were for covering up the taste of bad food—or so Holo was saying with much disapproval.

In any case, Holo's nose and her ability to tell the scents apart

was enough to make even the shopkeeper's eyes go wide in surprise, but it was no shock to someone who knew exactly what she was.

But what did surprise Lawrence was when the impressed shopkeeper, upon recognizing Holo's magnificent nose, brought out several small baskets for her to sample.

"I've a favor to ask, if you wouldn't mind."

Holo looked at Lawrence, then back to the shopkeeper.

"This one and this one. Also this and this. Here, too—lately there are rumors of fakes circulating. I've been doing an apothecary's work for thirty years, but sometimes even I find myself fooled by the fakes. I hear sometimes they train dogs to sniff out the scents nearer the fakes, but... would you consider lending me your nose?"

Evidently every business had its troubles.

Holo was obviously displeased, but Lawrence cannily answered the shopkeeper. "This girl once worked in a noble house, whose mistress was a great lover of spices. She naturally developed quite a sense for them working there, you see, and that's why I keep her near."

It was a circuitous explanation, but the shopkeeper was no amateur. He nodded immediately. "Do not worry," he said. "If she can tell the fakes from the genuine article, I'd be prepared to thank her appropriately."

He placed a weight on one side of a set of scales and then balanced it with an amount of copper coins.

The deal was done.

"Well then, Holo."

"Er... hmm... good wheat bread, then."

A bit of red dye would tint the whole barrel, the old saying went. Holo made her request, and Lawrence immediately nodded.

Evidently the spice the shopkeeper had at hand was rather

valuable, as the amount he had proposed to Lawrence was a tidy sum. There would be money left over even after buying Holo the bread she craved. He did not mind, as long as the entirety of this unexpected profit was not used up.

"Ah," murmured Lawrence to himself.

Holo sniffed at a sprig of herb that the shopkeeper gave her and looked up at him. "What makes you say that?" she asked Lawrence.

"Oh, nothing. I just remembered something I need to do. I'll be right back—just stay here."

Holo looked none too pleased, but the shopkeeper seemed to be fine with any arrangement that included Holo staying there and sniff testing his wares.

Lawrence lightly patted Holo's shoulder and walked off without waiting for her to reply.

He walked quickly through the town streets, making for his destination. The streets were more crowde, now, with people hurrying home.

The coins in his coin purse jingled.

Once Lawrence finished his errand, he returned to the shop, where he found Holo and the shopkeeper drinking wine.

He was extolling the virtues of apothecaries as he drank, so evidently the smell-detection work had finished.

The shopkeeper was the first to notice Lawrence, and he emerged from the front of the shop with a great smile on his face, as though he was about to pick Lawrence up in a warm embrace. "Well, well! Your girl's nose is truly a wonder. Dunking the fake in wine soon revealed the lie! I very nearly took a terrible loss," he said.

"I'm pleased to hear it. I see you've added wine to her payment."

"It's nothing compared with the loss I would've suffered. And

of course, my consideration will be a generous one," he said and hurried back inside his shop.

Holo was drinking wine with a very satisfied look on her face, and given that she had already been drunk earlier that same evening, the look in her eye was a bit suspicious.

"You've drunk too much."

"Hmm? I've finished a hard day's work! And unlike a certain someone who did nothing but tuck the profit away in their coin purse, I'm quite tired."

Perhaps angry at having been left behind, she shoved her finger at Lawrence's chest, and her eyes were surprisingly serious.

In lieu of an apology, Lawrence plucked an herb fragment away from the corner of Holo's mouth. He sniffed it; it was an herb often said to go well with wine.

"Given that, I suppose you weren't able to do what we originally came here to do?"

At Lawrence's words, Holo drank more wine in noisy gulps and replied in an aggrieved tone, "Searching for a scent that wolves don't like means essentially that I have to put my nose to things I myself hate. Why must I do such a thing, pray tell?"

It was unclear whether she was speaking purposefully or whether it was just the wine, but in any case Holo was clearly upset at Lawrence leaving her behind. Lawrence sighed softly and took the wine cup from Holo's hand.

She had not been expecting this, evidently, and stared at the wine cup taken from her hand as though it was a truly mysterious thing.

"My wine?" she said, dazed.

She was quite charming when she was like this, but instead of a reply, Lawrence produced something from his breast pocket.

He had not left Holo behind to take care of an errand he'd "forgotten." His destination had been a money changer or

goldsmith or anywhere that an artisan who worked in iron or silver might be found.

Since the shops were largely preparing to close, he'd had to force the issue to get what he needed. And it did not hurt that his request was a simple one.

Lawrence produced the gift and handed it to Holo.

It was a *schmie* coin, with a hole put in it, hung on a thread.

"Is this...?"

"I can spare a single silver piece. And a dignified image like this one suits you."

Holo looked closely at the coin, then back up at Lawrence.

Her eyes were moist (perhaps that was the wine), but Lawrence knew he would never forget her shy smile in that moment for as long as he lived.

"Still," said Holo to Lawrence, "if I wear something like this, it might well keep me from encountering my kind during our travels."

Given that the *schmie* coin was used as a wolf ward, Lawrence took Holo's point. He took the string from which the coin dangled and affixed it about her neck. "Then wear it only when we're in a town."

Holo let him do as he wished, putting a question to him as he drew near to pass the thread under her hair. "What do you mean by that?"

The wine-blended scent that tickled Lawrence's nose was not any spice or oil; it was Holo's own faintly sweet scent.

He was feeling rather bold. "To keep away the wolves of the towns."

Holo stiffened in such sudden surprise that Lawrence was glad he had taken her wine cup away.

Her ears pricked up so stiffly that they nearly dislodged her kerchief, and, unable to contain her mirth, Holo doubled over in laughter.



Just then the shopkeeper emerged, bringing their consideration, and his eyes went wide at the scene.

Lawrence gave the man a rueful smile, just as Holo righted herself and took Lawrence's arm. "Bah-hah-hah-hah. Oh, you're a fool, you are. A grand fool."

"Not bad, eh?"

"Keh-heh-heh!" Holo continued laughing and straightened herself. "That was the foulest one today."

"Foul enough to keep wolves from bothering us?"

Holo grinned.

Lawrence received the payment from the shopkeeper—who was quite taken aback at Holo's laughter—and returned to him coin enough to pay for the wine Holo had drunk.

The shopkeeper tried to hire Holo on the spot, but of course was turned down. Lawrence led Holo off as they began to walk.

She clung tightly to Lawrence's arm, still giggling, and did not immediately let go.

It was as the stars were beginning to twinkle in the sky that a memory called to Lawrence. "Oh, that's right. If it was truly so foul..."

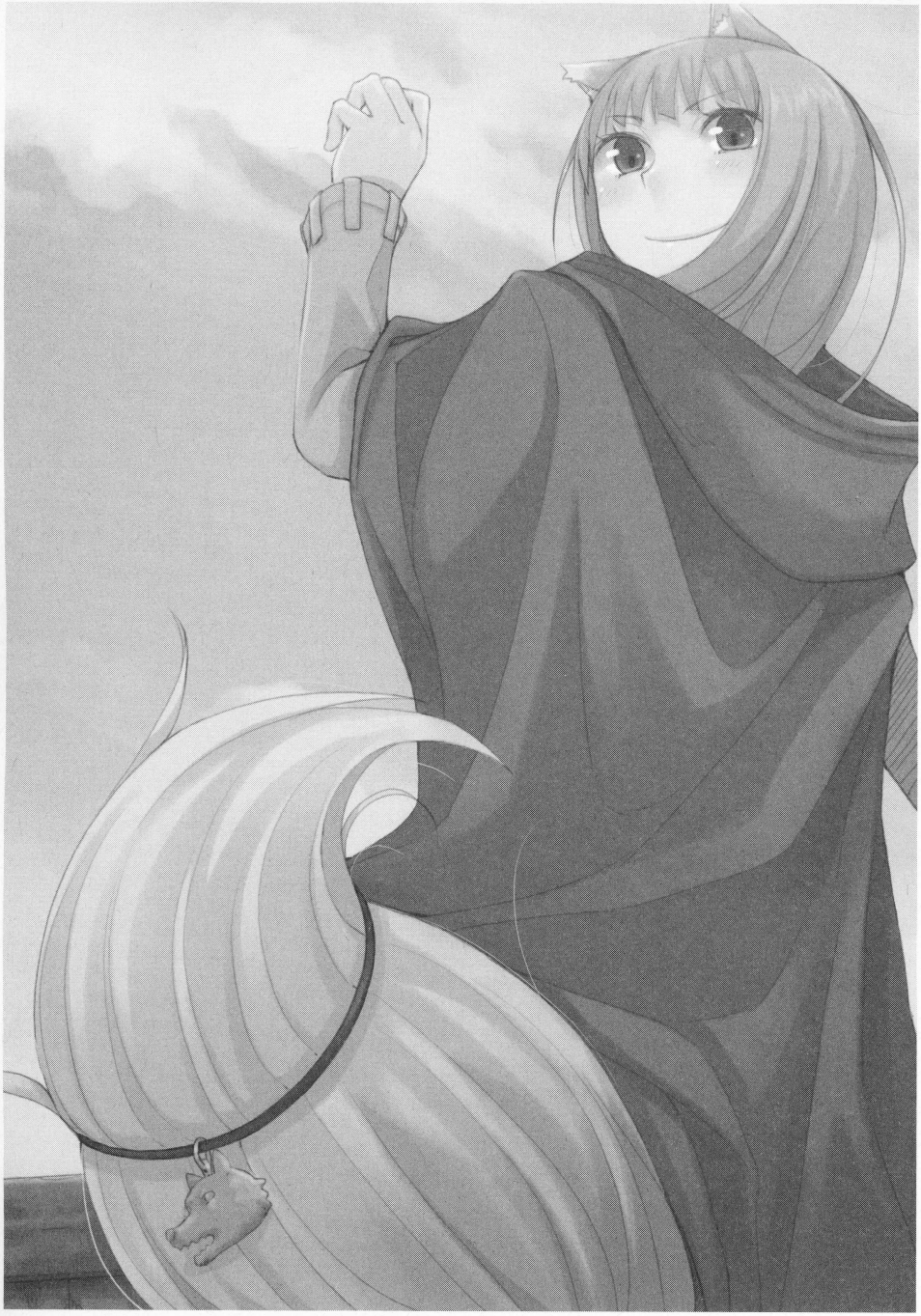
"Hmm?"

"...Then you shouldn't mind the burning peat so much anymore, eh?"

Holo, already teary-eyed from laughter, chuckled again and took a deep breath. "I concede it! You win."

At her breast hung the silver *schmie* piece.

In the twilight, the regal wolf on its face seemed to sigh a long-suffering sigh.



THE WOLF AND THE SILVER SIGH

Looking back, she had come quite a distance from the wagon.

Teasing the family of hares had been good fun, but evidently she had gotten carried away. She gave the sash about her waist a flutter, smiling at the hares as if to say, "Playtime's over!" Whereupon the doe and kit looked at each other, then hopped off about their business.

"Now then," she said and began to return to her own den. It was a strange den, though—made of iron and wood, wheeled, and pulled behind a horse.

Occasionally it was filled with goods, but at the moment it was carrying little of note, which made it most pleasant. When the wagon was too heavily loaded, it was cramped and uncomfortable, and when it carried nothing, it was too cold.

But with enough space between the wooden crates, canvas could be stretched between them, enclosing the space and making it quite cozy, as well as serving as good protection from the wind. Then some grain sacks for pillows and plenty of blankets to curl up under, and she could lie there and count the planks in the crates or look up at the sky.

Today the weather was fine, which meant the blankets would be delightfully warm. Just imagining it was enough to make her yawn, especially given that she'd just eaten her midday meal.

Human mouths had their troublesome cheeks and were thus a bit cramped, but only humans could raise their arms to stretch while they yawned.

Though she could not help feeling that the wolf body, to which she'd become accustomed over the centuries was her true form, she did not dislike her human form, though it came with some inconveniences. After all, her human form came with the queer human habit of wearing their decorations. While a wolf might give some consideration to her own coat, that hardly compared with human activities.

To put it in wolf terms, it was like being able to change the color of her fur every morning, depending on her mood. How could that be anything but delightful?

But of course her greatest delight was in showing her many looks to someone and seeing their reactions.

And to that end, her traveling companion was second to none. A muffler and a robe was all it took to elicit a great fuss.

If there was a problem, it was that these decorations cost money. She felt it something of a disgrace for her, a wisewolf, to worry about human money, but given that she was traveling in human form with a human, it could not be helped.

Moreover, her companion was a traveling merchant and was tiresomely attached to his money. Even the stop at this very field, which he had said was because of the pleasant weather and the need to stop for the midday meal, was obviously for some other reason as well.

He had been distracted the previous evening, and when she had spoken to him, he had given only vague replies. Only minutes ago during their meal, his gaze was off in the distance, as it

had been the whole while, and he had not even noticed her steal two separate pieces of cheese.

As for what her companion was thinking about, it seemed to be the coins and pelts they had seen in town.

There was an exhausting variety of both coins and pelts that circulated in the human world, and evidently the rates of exchange between them were a cause of great concern. To wit: Black pelts could be traded for silver coins, and those white-silver coins exchanged for brown pelts, which would be traded for red-copper coins, which could be used to purchase black pelts again, but at a profit.

To that end, he had been tallying figures ever since the previous night.

She knew that money was necessary to travel in the human world, as it was necessary for everything else, and as her companion was traveling first and foremost to make money, she had little cause to complain.

Far from it—when she regarded her pathetically toiling companion, she could not bring herself to ask him to buy her something that they could not even eat.

Still, it made her tail puff up a bit to see him still off in his own world, not even noticing that she'd returned to the wagon.

"Come now, how long must we stay here?" she said, spreading her blanket out. Her harsh tone seemed to do the job, as her companion finally looked up from the wooden plank. He seemed not to have eaten properly and was scratching figures into a wooden slate that had been coated with wax.

"Mm... oh, look at the hour." No matter the place, it was a trick of humans that they all seemed to be able to tell the time with a quick glance at the sky.

He hastily packed up his board and writing stick, his mouth filled with bread.

He seemed not to have noticed the two pieces of cheese that had been stolen and eaten.

"Are you finished with your walk?" asked her companion rather suddenly as she arranged the blanket on the planks and made ready to curl up under it. She had been so certain he had taken no notice of her, but apparently he had.

"I suppose 'twould have made you uneasy if I'd gone too far."

Her companion laughed easily, and the sight of his foolish smile made her want (rather maliciously) to truly vanish for a time and see how he liked that.

His foolishness was like that of a cat that is terrified of water but tries to catch fish anyway. "No matter how far you might roam, you'd always come back as soon as your belly was empty," was his reply.

It would have been ridiculous to be angry at him, so she merely smiled. At this, her foolish companion grinned proudly, as though he was quite sure he had gotten the better of her.

She deserved praise for letting him stray so far.

"Well, then, I'll harness the horse and we'll be on our way." Her companion climbed down from the driver's seat and approached the horse, that had been loosed.

She held her chin in her hands and rested her elbows on the wagon bed's edge and watched him. Her companion—he was a kind and timid man but could sometimes be prideful and overconfident.

He prized money above all but his own life, sometimes bizarrely so. And yet when one might expect him to be miserly with the money he earned, he could be strangely generous, at which she always found her tail wagging.

Her companion had a tendency to believe she could be wooed with food, but regardless of how good those humans were at

cooking, she wondered if he truly considered that a wisewolf such as herself could always be distracted by food?

The notion that she would return simply because she was hungry—how absurd!

She would return because she did not relish the notion of eating alone, and she wagged her tail out of pleasure that he saw fit to spend his precious coin on her, that was all.

"Fool."

Her companion's horse was eating field grass, and he shook his head in irritation at it, tugging it this way and that. Yet he still fancied himself a cool, collected wolf among humans, which struck her as very funny indeed. "He's but a sheep," she murmured to herself and rested her cheek on the wagon bed's edge.

There in the still sunlight, she watched her foolish companion. She had no dissatisfaction, nor any complaints.

A smile played about her lips in spite of herself and grew wider as she realized her own silliness. "Perhaps I'm the fool, after all," she murmured in amusement, dropping her gaze to the ground.

And then—there, between the blades of grass, was something strange.

"What's that?"

She leaned over to look at it, but still could not quite make it out. Finally she got out of the wagon bed and picked it up. It was a beast's head rendered in metal and hung about a leather cord.

"What is this?" she murmured, peering at it, then heard the voice of her companion.

"Easy, easy!" The horse, evidently enjoying its rare freedom, seemed displeased at this interruption.

She met his dark black eyes and caught there a flicker of spite. But the horse would have had any number of chances to run away

had he wanted to. In other words, he was just having some fun at her companion's expense.

Well, it served him right.

"Come, don't buck like that! Yes, fine, I see how it is... there we go."

Her companion was used to this, though, and quickly harnessed the horse back up to the wagon while murmuring soothing words.

It was quite charming to see a usually perfect person suddenly act foolish, but not nearly as so to see a foolish person show surprising skill.

But when the horse gave her companion a long-suffering nudge with his nose, said companion was back to his usual self.

"Honestly... well, then, let's be off. Er... what is it?"

He seemed to have thought she had already curled up under the blankets in the wagon. She was about to ask him about the item she had picked up, but decided to think on it for a while first, and in the end said nothing.

She gave a vague reply, then climbed up one of the wheels and into the wagon bed.

Her companion seemed unworried. He climbed back into the driver's seat, took up the reins, and started the cart moving forward. Their journey resumed.

In the gently swaying bed, she curled up atop the blankets and again inspected the item she'd retrieved.

All sorts of metals and gems she had never heard of circulated in the human world, but of the metals she was familiar with, this seemed to be lead. It was about the size of the last joint of her thumb and seemed to depict the head of a dog, a fox, or perhaps a clumsily rendered wolf.

It must have been made quite a long time in the past, as it was well rounded and many of the finer details had blackened. Yet

the feeling of long use made it, if anything, a more fascinating piece.

This particular wisewolf found such objects suited her better than newer, shinier ones. And given that this one was already so conveniently fastened to a leather cord, the notion of putting it on just to see her companion's reaction had a certain appeal.

Thinking as much, she first tried putting it around her wrist, but the cord was too long for that, and it did not look quite right, either. Then she considered putting it around her neck, but the pouch of wheat was already there.

She was trying to work out how to wear it when the thought finally came to her.

Since humans fastened their hair with all manner of ties, would it be so strange for a wolf to do likewise with the most splendid bit of her coat? Surely not. The cord was a mite too long, but with a bit of adjustment she got it secured nicely.

The lead device was only about the size of her thumb, so it did not look bad at all.

Tying a leather cord around her tail—such a notion would never have occurred to her in either the wilds or the wheat fields without the influence of humans.

She stood, spinning around like a puppy and chasing the adornment affixed about the middle of her tail. "Ooh-hu-hu-hu," she giggled, her face breaking into a smile from the pleasure of this unexpected find.

"Oh, that's right. There was something I wanted to ask you about," her companion said from the driver's seat.

He turned around. There was no chance for her to hide how she was curled around her own tail, admiring it.

But given that she had planned to show it to him anyway, she merely turned to face her stunned companion and waved her tail proudly. "What say you? Not bad, eh?"

She put her hand on her hips and twirled, doing her best imitation of the dancing town lasses she had seen on their travels.

Her companion's gaze remained fixed on her tail. He seemed to be at a loss for words. "It's, er, nice, but..."

But? Was he too abashed to simply admit how nice it looked that he had to add some sort of qualification? *How adorable!* she thought.

"Where did you get that?" her companion continued.

"Hmm? I picked it up over yonder." She regarded the piece again. It really did suit her well. Its nearly black-gray had a lovely presence amid her dark brown, white-tufted fur.

She wagged her tail, and her companion regarded her with a strange expression for a while before merely saying, "Ah," then turning to face forward again. This from her companion, who lost his composure if she so much as cocked her head in the manner of a town girl!

Surely this was proof of just how thoroughly the adornment suited her.

She sighed through her nose, then hopped up into the driver's seat. "So, what was it you wished to ask me?" Owing to the height difference, she had to look up at him to ask.

When in wolf form, she looked down on most creatures. Perhaps because of that, she had initially found looking up to feel rather subordinate, but lately she had come to enjoy it a certain amount.

And if her companion was going to be elusive, so much the better.

She stifled any sort of grin and simply looked up at him like an innocent pup. Her companion glanced over at her, trying to hide his obvious fluster.

If there was anything she looked forward to as much as mealtime, it was this.

She beamed at him, and he cleared his throat nervously before finally speaking. "Ahem. Er, no, it's not anything of importance, but..." As he talked, he glanced at her tail. "The town we were in until yesterday—about the quality of the furs there..."

"Mm."

Evidently he wanted to broach the subject of profit.

But when her companion made a profit, she was able to eat tasty things, which was always a fine thing. She felt no particular need to flatter him, but if she was going to travel with him anyway, she might as well do so with a smile.

Now she, too, cleared her throat, giving him an indulgent look. "Mm."

At this, her companion began to pepper her with questions about the quality of this or that pelt. Humans, for their part, judged the fineness of a pelt with their eyes and hands, but she was able to divine the quality on the spot, with no more than a sniff from her nose.

As she answered him, explaining that this one was fine and that one was not, she saw her companion's attention very clearly shift from her, then and there, to his memories of the goods they had seen.

When she had answered his last question, he did not so much as thank her, instead simply sinking into silence.

How rude, she thought, but could not bring herself to despise her companion's too-serious face. Feeling a little put out, she watched his profile. He seemed to think of something and reached back into the wagon bed.

He placed the waxed board with its tallies and figures scrawled all over it on his knee, and after murmuring something to himself, suddenly exclaimed, "Yes! I knew it!"

Humans, with their bad noses and bad ears, tended to have the unpleasant habit of shouting too loudly.

She was not the only one surprised; the horse was startled, too. Her companion, though, took no notice of this, and he roughly tossed the writing board back into the wagon and took up the reins. He pulled on them to stop the horse.

"... What is it?" she asked, rubbing her still-stinging ears like a cat would. Her companion's face was tiresomely cheerful.

"There's a gap in the marketplace. We can make some real money!"

As he turned the wagon around to head back the way they had come, he looked like a pup too young to have all of his teeth yet.

Having spent so much time with a merchant, she had grown to understand the basics of commerce. But she still wondered how a series of buying and selling that ended up with the same goods they started with could possibly turn a profit.

According to her companion, it could.

"You'll be despised if you bring out a mountain of small coins to pay for an expensive item, and if you try to buy a small thing with a high-value coin, it's the same thing. So people use coins appropriate for the various goods they're buying. But sometimes furs are simply exchanged for furs, and the same goes for coins. So—"

"So in all that exchange, sometimes there are places where they aren't equivalent, aye?"

"That's right. I've calculated it over and over, and there's no mistaking it. By doing nothing more than buying and selling in town, we can make twenty, maybe even thirty percent. It's a grand opportunity!"

That might well have been true, but her companion's excitement was dampening her own. And she had yet to be properly complimented on the tail adornment she had so cleverly put on.

But of course, her companion was unable to pay attention to

more than one thing at once. She really could not expect too much from him.

They entered the town's walls they had only just left that morning. It was just as crowded as it had always been, and looking at the crowd, she could not help but wonder if her companion had truly considered whether out of all these people, not a single one had noticed the gap he thought he had discovered.

Of course, no matter the endeavor, both successes and failures were common. At the very least, she had to admit that her companion had brought her on adventures the likes of which she had nearly forgotten after so long.

Watching him glance here and there in his impatience to begin trading was quite amusing. But then—no sooner had they stabled the horse than her companion looked to her and spoke.

"Now then, would you go and wait for me in the tavern?"

"Wha...?" she said, frozen in place. She had been certain that she would be going along with him, to sniff out the quality of the pelts and to listen to the sounds of the coins, that for a moment she honestly thought she was being teased.

"I'll be going to shops all over the town. With these crowds, I think you'd hate being dragged this way and that, wouldn't you?"

Unfair, she thought. If she was going to be such a burden for him to bring along, he could at least say so. But he obviously did not want to bring her, so when he said, "...Wouldn't you?" how could she reply but to agree?

Only merchants were so skilled at exploiting the difference between inward intention and outward expression to manipulate things for their own ends. Her companion did this quite frequently, though he was not particularly aware of it.

"Aye, I suppose not," she said, faking a vague smile, not bothering to hide her irritation from her companion. But he seemed to misunderstand and patted her head as though she were a pup.

He probably thought she was merely pouting at being left alone. And would he even now think her to be holding his reins?

He was an exasperating fool, but even then she found his confident smile so charming—so perhaps he was not the biggest fool.

"Still, I don't suppose you'll have me wait there without any means," she said. Her companion's arm looked thin, but it felt surprisingly sturdy as she took it.

He shot her his most sour look, but in the end, he gave her a single shiny silver piece. Evidently, he was confident in his current prospects.

"Don't use it all."

She did not bother to remind him that it would not have cost him a single copper had he only brought her along.

In truth, her companion probably had not had the time to leisurely take her around with him, because here in this walled town, the ringing of the bells marked the strict beginning and end of the day.

The ringing of *this* bell marked the opening of the market; the ringing of *that* bell meant the craftsmen could take their break. It was a spectacle, as though the whole town danced to the beat of the same drum. From her vantage point out of a second-story window of the inn, bottle of wine in hand, the rhythmic impression she got was particularly strong.

When she thought about it that way, her companion—who journeyed across the land, making his living with nothing but his wagon and his wits, beholden only to the movements of the sun and the moon—was unmistakably among the freest of humans.

Freedom and strength flowed from the same spring. Despite

his foolishness and softheartedness, his belief in his own abilities gave him a mysteriously attractive strength.

She thought back on the memories of their journey together thus far, but this did not do much to soothe her frustration with being left behind—or rather, perhaps it was failing to quiet her anger.

With just a single silver coin to spend, she was forced into the corner of an open-fronted tavern. With night yet to fall, the only patrons were a few indolent travelers, along with some withered regulars, drying like fish in the sun. And even with them, there were not many there, so Holo wound up in one corner of the tavern, lazily watching the swirl of foot traffic stream by in front of the place.

Worse, she had not even had time to change clothes, so she was still dressed as what the humans called a nun.

Thanks to that, whenever anyone passed near her table, every single one of them said the same thing as they left her a small coin: "God's blessing be upon you."

Then they would put their hands together or occasionally seek to take hers in greeting, then return to their own table.

Despite how much she hated being worshipped, she found this particular form of respect paying so foolish she could not even be angry at it.

She ate her beans and sipped her wine in order to drown the occasional tears that her great yawns squeezed out.

Thinking of the times her foolish companion's business plans had not gone well, she had ordered sour wine of notably poor quality.

It was bad enough to keep her awake and bad enough to keep her mind on her anger at having been left alone. She was wiping a lingering drop from her lips with an irritated finger flick when a familiar figure entered her field of vision.

On his back was a great load of pelts, and he was walking straight ahead and purposefully, without so much as a sideways glance.

The look in his eyes was the one he had when things were going well.

Her companion seemed not to realize that whenever things were going his way, he wore an expression that made it obvious he thought he was being cool and collected. Likewise, whenever things went poorly, the desperation with which he fought back panic was also easy to see. He was always trying to keep his thoughts to himself.

Was the only time he was truly calm while he slept? Seeing him serene was so rare that she sometimes stayed up at night to watch him, just to see his quiet expression. She wondered what he would say if he knew.

He would probably become too self-conscious to sleep.

And yet that in and of itself was rather charming, she thought—and then realized she was out of wine.

Without anyone to talk to, it was all too easy to empty one's cup.

She raised her cup in the air and ordered another round from the bored-looking tavern keeper.

Her companion came out of the swirl of humanity and entered her quiet little corner of the world, but only after passing by several times.

Having had nothing but the bad wine, her stomach had gotten sour, too, so she told him not to say a thing until he had ordered her some cheese or bread, about which he offered not a whit of complaint.

Rather, he wore a wide and satisfied smile. She would not have been surprised if he had scooped her up in his arms and nuzzled her with his face.

"I love the feeling of outsmarting everyone around me!" he said, pinching her cheek.

He was in high spirits indeed. And yet, he did not produce the requested coin, which was very like him.

"Just so long as you aren't caught at it."

"I'll be long gone before anyone catches me."

Given the adventures they'd had so far, it was comically rash for him to say such things, but it was pleasant to see him brimming with such confidence. Finally, he smiled and presented his winnings.

It was true, though—from the gradually increasing loads of fur on his back as he had traveled back and forth, she could tell he had been profiting.

Greater profit required greater capital.

She remembered the words from a previous misfortune, and surely the reason he had asked her to judge the quality of the pelts he started with was to understand the amount he stood to lose if things went poorly.

It was a sickening level of care, but it arose from his usual habits.

The way he observed and interacted with her, carefully and dispassionately, was the best example of this. It was conservative, even mercenary. If he ended up being unreliable when she truly needed him, she ought to give him a view of the dust she would kick up as she left him behind, but unfortunately doing so would tip her own hand, which hardly seemed fair.

And yet, he was often so courageous and bold. Such a troublesome fellow he was.

Such thoughts chased themselves through her head as she drained her cup. She was unsure how many she'd had. The cup seemed to empty itself so quickly she wondered if it had a hole in the bottom, and she turned it over to check. She was shocked by

the sudden appearance of someone's foot in her vision. Evidently her senses had been somewhat dulled by the wine.

She looked up and saw her delighted companion. His hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat.

"Success!" He plopped himself down, his coin purse full to bursting. "Though some others caught on to what I was doing, so the profit dropped a bit. We all pulled just before we would've been ruined, though."

Having sat himself down in a chair, her companion ordered wine, and as soon as it came, he drained half the cup in a single go, then sighed a happy sigh.

She could tell from the smell of his pride that he had done quite a bit of running around.

"I'd say we should drink a toast, but you're a bit too drunk for that," he said with a wry smile.

She was so overcome with the desire to show her displeasure that she brought her empty cup to her lips.

"Let's have some tastier wine tomorrow. We'll pass tonight at an inn. Ah, it's nice to make money," said her companion happily, draining the remnants of his cup.

No doubt he was sincerely happy. And faced with that smile of his, she could not help but smile herself.

"We ought to retire for the evening. Can you walk?"

She took the offered hand with a fondness as though it was the first offer in centuries, and all the hotter for her drunkenness. A warm sleepiness pervaded her as though soaking into her head.

Though it was shameful of a wisewolf to do so, as her companion paid up, her sleepiness drove her to hang on him like a grumpy pup.

"Steady now. We only have to go as far as the inn."

The more he told her to be steady or asked if she were all right, the more wobbly the ground beneath her seemed.

She let herself be taken by the hand like a child, and they went out into the twilight town.

Sound flooded her ears, and even with her eyes mostly closed, she could discern the town's state: People talking, animals braying, things clattering against one another or scraping against the ground.

And amid this cacophony, it was the sound of her companion's heartbeat that was of special note.

Or perhaps that was her own heart, she mused.

The ambiguity was strangely comfortable. Her gait was light, and all she thought of was her companion's hand as he led her along.

If only this moment could last forever.

She shook the thought away—absurd! And then at that very moment—

"What do you mean you can't buy these pelts?!" someone shouted, bringing her back to herself in a flash.

"I mean we can't buy them. We've gotten word from the guild that someone's been going around using furs as part of some strange scheme. We can't buy any more until we hear more."

"What nonsense is that?!"

In a town as noisy as this one, no one had time to stop and take notice of a single shout. But her companion, who had just made such a fine profit on furs, certainly did.

"That was close," said her companion, looking at her and grinning.

She could not help thinking that this was what happened as soon as things went well, but still she smiled at him, sharing the perverse pleasure of keeping his secret.

But it seemed the merchants, who were now facing a crisis, would not endure this treatment. "Call out the guild chief!" one finally shouted, pounding on the counter.

At this, people finally started to stop walking and peer in the direction of the commotion. Another merchant with a great pile of pelts on his back began to rage, but it seemed like an act. It was probably a ploy to raise enough of a fuss to force the purchase of his furs. Her companion had done the same thing himself not infrequently—merchants could be surprisingly adaptable.

She watched, quite impressed with the display.

"Let's go." Having gotten away with his scheme, her companion pulled on her hand. His face was tense; even as he made off with his gains, he could not bear to watch as others faced loss.

He was a fool, but a kind fool at least. She started to walk as the thought occurred to her, pulled along by her companion. Then—

"Look! They carry the seal of Dene Allbrook. What nonsense is this, that you can't buy them?" said the merchant, taking a bundle of pelts out of his pile and brandishing it over his head. The merchant having such demands made of him looked troubled. No doubt the seal in question was proof of something.

As she had come to understand while watching her companion work, humans often used a thing called "trust." It was very common for them to buy and receive items from people they had never met, so such a thing was crucial. If that merchant had something that ought to have earned him trust and yet he was still being turned down, no wonder he was angry.

Things seemed to be getting rowdy, she thought, and tried to see, but her companion hastily pulled her by her hand and stopped her, then froze in his tracks—but not out of sympathy for the merchant.

The bundle of furs the man was holding up—there was something familiar affixed to the leather strap that held them together. It stood out amid the red-brown furs, a spot of dark silver.

Her companion pulled on her hand even more firmly, but she resisted, looking back over her shoulder, then down at her own tail underneath her robe. Then she looked back up again at the enraged merchant and finally realized that the metal piece on his bundle and the one she'd put on her tail were one and the same.

Worse, the pelts bundled and marked thus were fox furs of no great quality, the hair scruffy and dry.

She could feel very distinctly the sweat that began to break out on her companion's palm. In no time at all, the truth of their conversation on the wagon became very clear to her.

Her companion had not been disturbed by how well the tail adornment she had found had suited her. It was because putting it on her tail marked her own fur as a fox pelt ready for sale.

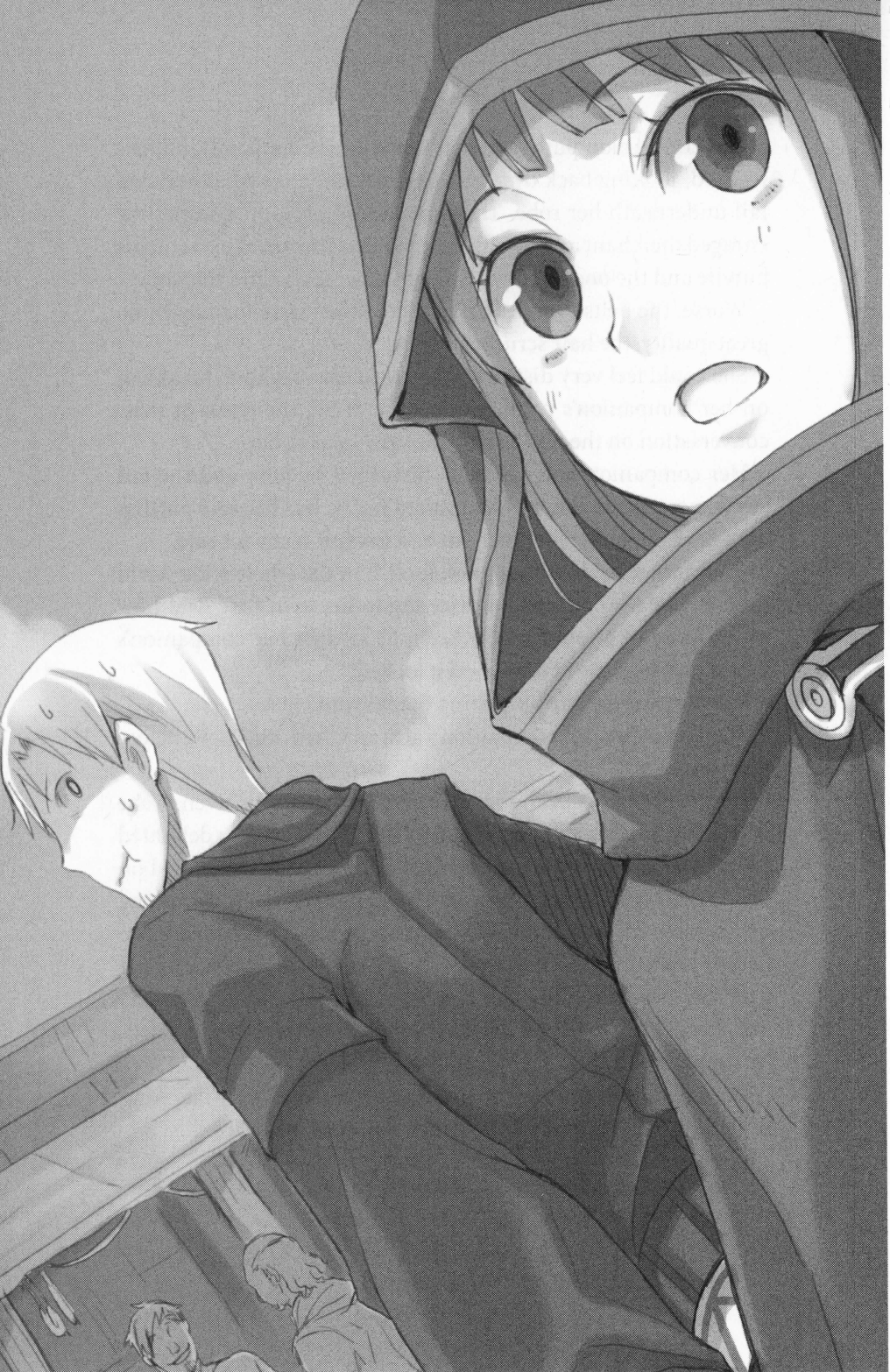
Could there be anything more foolish in the whole wide world than a wolf who attached a price tag to her own fur? And how much more of a fool had she been, to assume her companion's fluster was because of how good it looked?

But that was not the only thing that angered her.

There was also her companion's attitude then, and now, before her very eyes.

He had obviously been trying to keep her from this, even as she had foolishly put a price tag on her own tail and been so delighted by it. Even now, he was still trying to protect her as he pulled on her hand. No doubt that was why he had not brought her along on his town errands and also why he had been so disturbed when he had looked at her from the driver's seat of the wagon. He had probably been thinking the best way to avoid a shipwreck was not to rock the boat. And now that everything had been revealed, he simply stood there mutely. It was very clear.

She knew perfectly well that he had not been silently laughing at her and that none of this had been done out of malice.



And yet—and still, that a wisewolf should act such a fool!

She did not know how many times she had found human cheeks to be troublesome things, but just this once she was grateful for them, for they hid her raging fangs. Or if not for that, for the convenience of being able to fake many other expressions.

"Um, look—"

But just as her companion wrung some tortured words from what little wisdom he possessed, she let go of his sweaty palm and clung tightly to his arm. Just as she had seen town girls do, she nuzzled her face against it, pressing her whole body against his.

She could feel him freeze. He was surely remembering the times he had been attacked by wild dogs in the wilderness.

But she was not a wild dog. She was Holo the Wisewolf.

She looked up at him. "So, then, how fine is the traveling merchant I've wrapped about my arm?" she said, a great smile on her face.

"Wait, you—"

"You earned a tidy sum, didn't you? I cannot wait to see what wine you will treat me to in celebration!"

If pressed on who was more at fault, it was probably she who bore the greater portion. But there were some things she could not pass up.

Her companion seemed to find this more than a little unreasonable, but after gazing at her with a pained expression, he finally nodded.

Some things could not be passed up. For example, the chance to hold hostage to her own selfishness a merchant so clever he had outsmarted this whole bustling town.

It was absurd, she thought. And yet she could not stop.

And anyway, as he heaved a sigh and began to trudge along, her companion's profile did not look entirely displeased.

She clung to his arm, as though to show the whole world that this wisewolf was the only one who understood his true worth.

She knew it was foolish, but it felt only appropriate for someone like her, who would happily fix a price tag to her own tail. Yes—it was only appropriate.



THE SHEPHERDESS AND THE BLACK KNIGHT

PROLOGUE

Just one hill away from the town, an unfamiliar landscape spread out before her.

Unlike the hills and fields she knew so well that she could walk them with her eyes closed, this land led to another country.

Looking up, she saw birds flying high overhead, and far behind her, she could see sheep and a shepherd.

Though she had little fondness for it, now that she was finally leaving the place, a faint loneliness welled up within her.

The wind blew softly, as though sighing its exasperation at her. She sighed herself and took a deep breath. Embarking on such a journey always inspired such misgivings.

She shifted the pack on her shoulders and faced forward. The road stretched straight out ahead, and there was no need for hesitation. After all, she was not alone.

Her faithful, black-furred knight looked up at her with his clear eyes. Her courageous, faithful companion was occasionally quite strict as befitted a proper knight. He gazed at her, seemingly able to see right through her to the worry she felt.

Instead of telling him she was all right, she simply smiled at

him, which her knight stood at—as though to say, "Now all we have to do is get moving."

Having taken the first step, the second came much more easily. The third and fourth were beneath notice.

The more they walked, the more the scenery around them began to change.

Their journey to seek a new world and a new life had begun.

One

The world turns on happenstance. I doubt many would raise any complaint with such a statement. I myself owe my continued existence entirely to lucky fate.

I know not exactly how many days or months have passed since I was given life. I can say only that it has not been a short amount of time.

More than once I have felt myself on the brink of surrender, wondering whether this was the end of my life, only to be saved by a coincidence I would've had no right to expect.

There is another thing I must say—and that is in the whole of my life, I have served only two masters.

My first master was a taciturn man, calm as a mountain, the very image of the concept of "master." He trained me very strictly from the day my eyes came open, and it was he who gave me many skills I'll doubtless rely upon until the day I die. While ours was a simple and quiet life, when I think upon those happy memories now, my chest tightens. I was fulfilled, wanted for nothing, and I quite naively believed those days could last forever.

But owing to something I can only conceive of as simple fate, it all vanished like a popping bubble on the water.

Go out into the wilderness, and you will find not only bears and wolves, but also men armed with iron weapons deadlier than any tooth or claw. Though my master and I had been very careful, sudden wind and rain had driven us to make camp where we shouldn't have.

Yet make camp we did. There was nothing inevitable about those men finding us there, and for both our camping and their attack, I find myself unable to give any explanation other than sheer coincidence. I could only think that our encounter with them that night was a testament to the mysterious power of happenstance.

In any case, I fought my hardest. I fought with all my might to the brink of death.

I know for certain that I unhesitatingly felt that the word *warrior* was made for me, and perhaps it would be most accurate to say that a crack appeared in my pride that day.

We faced an overwhelming disadvantage; my master fell, and I was wounded.

I can still remember all too clearly my master's face in the driving storm, smeared with blood, muck, and rain, as he offered to me the staff that had been my very life.

A servant must protect his master's honor as much as his life.

I took my master's staff, and I ran. Desperately I ran.

In that moment, the wind, rain, and gloom of the night became my allies. I ran mindlessly, and when I came to myself, dawn was breaking.

Heedless of my own wounds, I had exhausted myself beyond the ability to take another step and fell against a large boulder, curling up right there.

The night's wind and rain vanished like they had never been there, and I will never forget the warmth that came with the sun as it rose over the horizon. Though it pains me to say so, with

that warmth came the thought that here was the place where I would die.

Had I protected my master's honor, or had I failed?

Before the staff that lay in front of me, the staff that had surely been a keepsake of his, I asked this of myself.

I decided that when I reached heaven, I would ask my master. That was my sole comfort as I closed my eyes, certain that I would never again open them.

Thus it was that when someone began to move me and I opened my eyes to see, I was sure that whatever I saw there would be heaven itself.

But what greeted me was not a sight that befit heaven, I was certain.

It was a girl, her face dirty, her body clothed in rags—an old tree by the side of the road would've been more elegant than she. She was shaking me with her chapped hands—not to warm them up, but to wake me.

Sometimes when my master would get far enough into his cups to loosen his tongue, he would call me a knight. And though he only occasionally told me the tales of true knights, I nonetheless felt that the true spirit of a knight entered my heart.

And thus was I helplessly party to a miracle.

Even though she herself was near collapse, the girl desperately cried for me to stand, to return from the edge of death. And if I had not stood there, I could never again have been called a knight.

I swallowed back my wounds, my exhaustion, and I stood.

I will never forget the pride I felt in that moment.

Despite being on the verge of death herself, she was possessed of such a kind heart that when she saw me stand, she smiled a smile of relief. Beset by cold and hunger, she could still care for another and could still smile. And in that moment, I knew that I had found my new master.

Though both she and I then collapsed on that spot, we did not leave each other's side. It must have been fate. After sleeping for a time, it was hunger that awoke us, and our eyes opened in the same moment.

Yes, it was most certainly a fated encounter.

I had gained a new master—a new master that despite being a bit unsteady was possessed of incomparable benevolence, and one whose worthiness of my utmost service was beyond question. Her name was Norah, and she was a girl young enough to still retain a certain childish innocence.

My humble, unworthy self's name is Enek. Thanks to my name being carved on the staff I presented to my new master, I was able to avoid the misfortune of changing my name. It seems that great turns of fate summon smaller ones.

Though we cannot speak to each other, our bond is all the stronger for that. I wonder if my human master would be angry at me, a mere dog, for thinking so. While she may be an excellent person in spite of herself, she would face no small danger without me at her side, so I shall forgive her that much.

If you would know why, you have but to look.

Without me at her side, peaceful sleep is difficult for her. While she may be a weak master, ours is a beautiful relationship, one in which each supports the other. Having determined as much, I sleep under the same blanket as my master. It's warmer for both of us that way.

The season is winter.

Surely none can question such a decision.

Morning comes early in winter. Not because the sun rises earlier, of course, but rather because the cold makes it impossible to remain asleep.

We both awoke before dawn, looked up at the dark sky, and

yawned great yawns. My master was the only one to subsequently sneeze, while I regarded her clumsiness with a certain forbearance.

"My nose was just itchy...," she gave as her excuse upon noticing my gaze. "Still."

Though she had held me close underneath the blanket, stubbornly unwilling to face the winter chill, my master had summoned her spirits and thrown it off. She continued speaking as she looked up at the few stars that still shone in the sky.

"I'm still not used to not hearing the sheep bleating when I wake up."

Indeed. I myself felt quite the same way.

"The shepherd's life was hard, but... now that I don't have to do it anymore, I do feel a bit lonely."

The shepherd's life, with its constant tending of helpless sheep, leading them to pastures where they can eat their fill of grass, was an exhausting one. Left alone, the sheep would wander, and no matter how they were scolded, they never remembered the way. All the powerless things did was baa and baa, totally oblivious to the relationship between master and servant—how could the work of herding them be anything but arduous?

While my master and I made our living doing such work, nothing lasts forever, and eventually we quit those labors, which we'd toiled at for so long. For my part, it was good to no longer begin every day with seeing my master's worried profile as she surveyed the flock to make sure none had gone missing during the night.

And yet, the loss of the carefree calls of the sheep did not sit well.

It had been two weeks since my master and I began our travels—well past time for us to be over our lingering attachments. But no matter how firmly I might have believed that, as I

looked up at my master's distracted face, I found myself unable to resist putting my nose to her cheek and nuzzling her.

I did not want to see her looking so delicate.

"Mm... sorry. I'm fine." My master held my face in both hands and smiled.

While I had half wished for it, I will never forget my master's face when she removed the bell that is the symbol of the shepherd from atop her staff.

I gave a bark, and my breath was white.

My master smiled self-consciously and regained her natural strength of spirit. "Well, shall we break our fast, then? Just a bit—I splurged a bit in the last town," she said, and I couldn't help but wince a little at the childish way she rummaged around in a burlap sack to produce some bread.

Just because we had a bit of room in our travel budget was no cause for needless luxury, I thought, looking steadily at my master. Noticing my gaze, she giggled for some reason. "Come, Enek. Don't be naughty."

She misunderstood me. My tail was not wagging because of the contents of the sack or any such frivolous reason, but rather because of my pleasure at her seemingly regaining her strength...

"But look how white the bread is!" My master split the loaf in two and showed me the interior.

And then the scent of the earth-nurtured wheat reached my nose.

I wish to hold my canine nature up as a point of pride, and as such I did not try to fight my instincts.

Around the time we were finishing our short meal, the sky began to pale.

The stars, shining coldly in the sky like tiny fragments of ice,

began to melt away, and with each step we took, we could see farther and farther.

That said, it was not as though it was much warmer, and our breath lingered behind us in a long ribbon, the land as cold as always.

"It's easier not having the sheep around, but it would be nice to stay somewhere with a roof soon." My master walked along with a strength you'd never imagine she possessed just by looking at her, planting her now bell-less staff in the ground as she went. "But I think we'll be there today or maybe tomorrow," she said, opening up a map drawn on a sheepskin parchment.

While they were the tools of her job, my master would cry when her sheep were injured, scold them when they did something dangerous, and feel lonely when she was away from them. In a way, she was like their mother. Given that, I would've thought that she would avoid using a sheepskin map, but strangely, that seemed not to be the case.

There were still a few things I didn't understand about humans.

"Anyway, what do you think about the town rumors, Enek?" my master asked as she gazed at the map. She didn't look up, perhaps from a faint sense of unease.

I served my master, and it was my fate to walk whichever path she chose. If that path involved a certain amount of danger, then it fell to me to hearten her.

Having determined that, I moved my gaze from my master to the path ahead, to indicate that if she'd made her decision, there was nothing to do but proceed.

"You're right. After all, they say employers pay only for danger or toil."

I gave a bark in response.

My master had made a name for herself as a shepherdess, but circumstances had forced her to retire. Fortunately, she had

been left with plenty of money—enough for her to make her own dream a reality. She had many times told me of her desire to become a seamstress. I certainly didn't mind her sharing her dreams with me, although I did not much like the way she spoke of them as things that could never happen.

Given that, while I would do my utmost to help her achieve her dream now that it seemed possible, I could not do so as happily as I might have—because, as she'd said, to make one's dream come true, one had to be prepared for a certain amount of danger.

"They say half the people in town have died from illness."

If she's afraid, then we ought to turn back, was my foolish thought.

But my master had a reason for wanting to risk such danger. During our travels, she'd heard tell of a village stricken with sickness. The population had declined, and with it the available workers, so for the town to recover there was a need for labor.

If true, then it would be easy for someone like my master, who had neither connections nor experience, to find work.

But the situation would not last long. Once word began to spread that the illness had run its course, people from all around would come seeking work—which meant that the opportunity had to be seized now.

It was a brave merchant who'd told my master of this, one who, even amid all the talk of people taking pains to avoid the town, had gone there to do business. According to him, he'd even go to the depths of hell, so long as there was someone there to trade with. Admirable of him.

According to him, the sickness that plagued the town of Kuskov was beginning to lift, and soon there would be little to worry about—and moreover, that it was only a matter of time before word of this began to spread throughout the region.

Time was of the essence, my master said, and no sooner had

she heard the merchant's tale than we set out. Earlier that very same day, my master had had her wish to become a seamstress flatly turned down, so that was probably another reason for her haste.

"Still, for half the town to have died, I wonder if the Church's prayers had no effect...," said my master vaguely as she folded up the map.

While she was employed as a shepherdess, my master was treated unbelievably poorly by the Church. Perhaps envious of her skill, they branded her a witch. In the face of such treatment, she maintained a pleasant heart, but it's also true that it was a terrible burden on her. And it was perhaps a source of pride for me to serve under one who could endure such treatment without merrily taking her revenge.

Still, I can't help but feel some irritation at my master's excessive honesty, which made her reluctant to take even the mildest revenge, and because of which she even now continues to acknowledge the Church's authority.

So I simply looked ahead without replying.

Regardless of whether or not she knew what I was thinking, my master is not the most eloquent of humans at the best of times, so we continued down the road for a while in silence after that. The sun climbed higher in the sky, and as we warmed up, our pace quickened until we were traveling rather more quickly than the average traveler. Progress was good, and according to the map my master was consulting, we were approaching the town.

Being an animal, more or less, I could sleep outside for as many days in a row as necessary, but my master, being human, was not so equipped. We would evidently be arriving in the evening of the next day, and rest would be the first priority—we could figure out the particulars of the plague later.

My master was no delicate garden flower, but even the heartiest wildflower would wither if exposed to the cold wind for long enough. And she didn't have enough meat on her bones besides.

It seems to me that if humans don't have fur like animals, the least they could do is try to be a little more substantial. As it is, she'd hardly have cause to complain if someone mistook her for an underfed young man.

Just as I was thinking this—

"Enek!"

My tail fur stiffened at the calling of my name, but not because I'd been thinking about my master.

When one enjoys such a close working relationship as my master and I have, many meanings can be conveyed with but a single call of a name, depending on how it's done.

This particular call had a nostalgic echo to it, one that set my blood rushing.

My master raised her staff and pointed ahead.

"—!" I didn't so much as think before I dashed away at such speed that I could barely hear her next call. My destination was the crest of the hill she'd pointed to.

There were some stray, raggedy-looking sheep there, grazing lazily away.

My claws bit into the earth, and the only sound I could hear was the wind rushing in my ears.

The idle sheep finally seemed to take notice of me, and panicked, they tried to run. But I was not one to let these sluggish creatures escape.

I ran and jumped with enough force to scoop divots of grass free, coming around in front of the sheep and barking a great bark.

The sheep, pushed to the limits of confusion, merely stamped their feet, and then they were mine to instruct as I pleased. To

inform them of that fact, I lifted my head skyward and loosed a howl.

Of course, I knew that this was only a moment's passing fancy, and indeed at the base of the hill, my master was walking toward me, laughing. But how could I resist the opportunity to howl a proud, gallant howl?

While I felt a bit sorry for the cowed, frightened sheep, they were fortunate that I was not a ravenous wolf. When my master waved her staff, I released them and went to her side.

When she scratched me behind the ears as though to say, *Well done*, it was all the reward I would ever need.

"Sorry for startling you," said my master to the sheep. Being wild sheep, they had a certain amount of their own pride, which they voiced with high bleats before running off. Stray sheep were not rare near towns. While only God knew how long they might live, that was just as true for me.

I considered this as my master watched the fleeing sheep through narrowed eyes.

She became aware of my gaze and smiled bashfully, her cheeks slightly flushed from her run. "I do feel a bit badly for the sheep, but that *was* fun."

My master had been rather bad herself.

That evening we made camp moderately removed from the road in the space between two hills. The traveling conditions hadn't been so bad, but we had yet to encounter a single other traveler—perhaps thanks to the rumors of a plague killing half the town's population. Given the circumstances, we probably could have safely made camp at the roadside, but my master is a very careful person.

Nonetheless, she found herself stunned into silence when a sparrow she was feeding scraps of bread to was taken by a hawk

that swooped down from the sky and carried it off. It wasn't the first time this sort of thing had happened, but my master never learns.

And when she came to her senses, she took her frustration out on me, as she always does.

I may be a knight, but there was little I could do about literally airborne attacks.

But I obediently let my ears and tail droop, and waited for my master's anger to pass.

It was not long after that the sun set and we went to sleep. Without a fire, the only way to keep warm was to huddle together, and while it was less stressful not to have sheep to mind, it was unavoidable that we would drop our guard. I try to be mindful of our surroundings as I go to sleep, but it is hard to escape from that warmth. I no longer hesitated much to tuck my face back under the blanket when my master shifted, such that it was exposed to the cold. This made me little better than a house dog, I thought in my half-asleep state, but my body busied itself nestling back under my master's arm.

It was a difficult impulse to resist.

Faced with choosing between my honor as a knight and the pleasant warmth of my master's embrace, while I'm not certain whether I growled at the choice, I definitely agonized over it.

Which is why I thought, for a moment, that what I sensed might have been my imagination.

But immediately after realizing that it was not my imagination, I raised my head and pricked up my ears. Yet around my neck was not only the blanket but also my master's arms, so squirming out to see was quite difficult.

She was still asleep, and as I struggled to get out, she mumbled something and tightened her grasp, but finally I wriggled free and got my head out from under the blanket.

It was then that I knew for certain—this was the sound of fighting!

"Mm... Enek?"

Since we'd been released from our duties as a shepherd, I hadn't been the only one to fall victim to the charms of uninterrupted sleep, but that was then. She soon saw from my state that what I had sensed was quite out of the ordinary, and her eyes went immediately wide as she scanned the area.

"A wolf?" My master had lived near a wood where wolves frequently appeared. She wasn't afraid, though—her voice carried with it her readiness to face them should they come. "No, not wolves..."

My master lowered her ear to the ground. She was about as good as I was at listening to the sound and discerning numbers and directions.

Soon concluding that there were no wolves, she stood and looked around. All the while my ears took in the sounds of fighting. I stared in the direction the sounds came from, trying to warn my master of what I heard.

Shouts and the occasional clash of iron. It was a fight between warriors.

"Bandits?"

Humans fear their own kind more than any wolf or wild animal—one of the world's great ironies. My master drew closer to me, and listened carefully. She seemed to realize by my lack of growl that the danger was not moving toward us.

My master quickly gathered up our things and slowly stood.

"..."

She indicated forward with her staff.

I began to walk, then trot toward the sound.

The moon was faintly and occasionally visible through patches in the clouds, and I cannot say that visibility was good. I was well

aware that my form was easily concealed in the gloom, but for that reason I looked back several times to make sure my master had not lost sight of me.

Finally, I crested the hill and was able to command a complete view. I turned my gaze to my master; she was lagging behind me, her body low, and her eyes widened in surprise.

Looking down from the top of the hill, it was easy to see what was happening, despite the considerable distance.

Flames rose from an inn nestled up against the road. It didn't take ears as keen as mine to hear the cries coming from it.

The inn was being attacked by bandits.

"Wh-what'll we do?" my master murmured. I could hardly blame her. Given her personality, she was no doubt wondering whether to try to help—but from here, it was impossible to tell how many bandits there were or how they were armed.

My master was a kind person to the end, but that could make things difficult sometimes. I prepared my body at least to defend her life.

A shower of sparks flew up; perhaps the roof of one of the smaller buildings had collapsed.

"Ah—!"

A person came running out of the front door of the main building, which the tongues of flame had yet to reach. I couldn't make out the face owing to the darkness and the smoke, but going by the person's clothes, they seemed to be a traveler on their pilgrimage.

I could also see the person wobble unsteadily, either from terror or injury.

The person staggered toward the road, and then another came after the pilgrim. This one had a sword in hand and was clearly on the side of the attackers.

The difference in speed was like that of an ox and a horse. The pilgrim would be caught very quickly, I was sure.

But then another figure came out of the inn's entrance, jumping at the attacker in the time it took him to turn around.

Next, I heard something very clearly, which meant that it was probably at least faintly audible to my master as well. "Run, please!" was the cry.

"Enek!"

I have no doubt her words were half out of sheer instinct. But I am a proud knight, a servant of my master. At her order and her staff, I charged.

At the end of my vision I saw the attacker throw off his assailant and plunge his sword at the fallen man, then pull it free.

But in his excitement, the attacker's steps were unsteady as though he was drunk. He was no match for me.

The grass deadened the sound of my footfalls, and the sound of the burning stables was my ally as well.

Completely unaware of me, the attacker walked toward the pilgrim, who was still trying to crawl away. The pilgrim seemed to hit upon some idea and began to pray, looking up to the heavens.

From behind him his attacker approached, smiling a cruel smile and raising his sword. But the very instant he prepared to strike his defenseless opponent from behind with that blade, he surely saw a flicker of black streak across the corner of his vision.

Surely he saw.

And in the next moment, my fangs sank into the wrist of his right arm, sending his sword flying away. My jaws can tear through the thickly meated rear leg of a sheep.

I felt his bones crack in my jaw and released my grip.

The man looked as though he'd seen a demon in the night. He fell back, and I ripped mercilessly into his right calf.

"Help! Heeelp!"

Then by the time I realized I'd been careless, it was too late. When I looked up, there was another man with a sword at the entrance to the inn.

I looked around and saw my master running in my direction. The only way to settle this would be to wipe out the bandits entirely.

"Hey, what happened?" Fortunately, the man in the doorway didn't seem to realize what was going on. I let go of the one in front of me and leaped over him, bolting straight ahead.

At the end of my sight, I found a face filled with shock and fear.

He dropped a heavy-looking sack, probably filled with loot from the inn, and readied his sword. I bared my fangs at him. Given the darkness, I'm sure I looked like a wolf to him and his comrades. That wasn't my intention, but I was perfectly happy to use it.

He used his sword not as a weapon, but as a shield, thrusting it feebly at me. I leaped at him, and I'd only begun to bite his face when he'd already fainted. The inside of the inn was a terrible mess, and there were three people on the floor who were wearing the same clothes as the pilgrim who'd tried to escape.

Then, I noticed a presence and looked to see another person coming down the stairs. From his dress, I could tell that he was another bandit, who'd come down to see what the commotion was. He noticed me, too, and our eyes met.

But then he saw the blood dripping from my snout, gave a shriek, and fled back up the stairs. However, I have an advantage when attacking from below. Three steps brought me to the base of the stairs, and two more were all it took for me to close the distance and put my jaws around the man's foot. He stumbled at the top of the stairs, kicking wildly and screaming an unearthly howl. I couldn't help but let go of his foot.

That was fortunate, though, because the man then fell right down the stairs. His right leg and left arm were bent in strange directions, but he seemed to be alive.

I looked down at the man from the upper landing and noticed that the inside of the inn had fallen silent. My ears told me that the other building was still burning, and my nose told me that it would not be long before this building burned as well. I was worried that there were more bandits, but I was more concerned with my master's safety than I was in such certainty. I ran down the stairs but stopped at the inn's exit.

Someone was just entering—it was the human who'd first caught sight of me. He was a bearded man, clad in cumbersome-looking long-sleeved robes, and his right side was soaked in blood. He was pale, too, but surely not just because of the wound.

"Ooh... Ugh... What calamity has happened here..."

The man cast his eyes over the terrible state of the inn and fell to his knees. They were wearing the same sort of clothing as he was, so perhaps the three figures on the floor had been his comrades.

I slipped past him, and upon coming outside, I saw my master, clasping her staff uncertainly. The moment she saw me, she came running and embraced me.

"I'm so glad you're safe!"

It would have been strange for her to be so concerned with my safety given that she was the one who'd set me upon the bandits, but it was just my master's personality to be this way. I looked past her and saw that the man who'd been stabbed with a sword already had a cloth covering him.

"Is that all the bandits?" my master asked, releasing me once she'd held me close and reassured herself.

With no way to answer, I merely barked once. But she got her response from the man who'd staggered into the inn moments earlier. "There were three bandits in all..."

"So there's one more?" asked my master, but the man shook his head.

Counting the one who'd fallen down the stairs, that made three. Would that my master could've seen my incredibly display of bravery, I thought, looking up at her.

"Oh God, we thank thee for this small blessing...," the man had the nerve to say.

It was I who brought him such good fortune, I and my master!

If she hadn't stroked my head, I'm quite certain I would've barked my irritation.

The bearded man's name was Giuseppe Ozenstein. He was the bishop of a church three weeks' walk west of here.

I felt some frustration at having saved someone so useless, but my master did not share my opinion. Despite all the suffering she'd endured at the hands of the Church, when this Giuseppe fellow introduced himself, she knelt and bowed her head.

Master, this is unseemly!

"Look up, please. You are verily an angel sent by God."

If the bearded Giuseppe had treated my master forcefully, I was fully prepared to respond appropriately, but it did not seem that such force would be used. My fangs stayed hidden for the nonce.

Giuseppe seemed several times my master's age and was deeply grateful to her.

"No, not at all... Anyway, it's much more thanks to Enek than me."

"Ah, quite right. So he's called Enek, is he? Truly, I owe you my life."

The wound in his side was surprisingly deep, and though she'd tried to stem the bleeding, it was not surprising that her skill was not up to the task. Giuseppe's face was pale as paper, but his grateful smile to me was so clearly genuine that it felt good to see.

As a knight, it was my duty to accept such gratitude.

"Still, the test God has given me is terribly heavy..."

Save for a single young man, all of Guiseppe's comrades were killed. And even the young man had a bad wound on his head and was unconscious. My master did the best she could to treat him, but only God knew whether he would recover.

"And the other people in the inn, were they...?" My master had bound the bandits I'd defeated and tied them to the fence that encircled the inn.

"No...this place was empty. We had come to borrow a stable and pass the night, but the bandits seemed to be waiting for that. But...oh, how terrible they were, these pagan men!"

"...You mean, their arrowhead amulets?"

"So you noticed, did you? That's right. They're descended from the sorcerers who still practice their dark arts in the eastern mountains. They were waiting for us to sleep. The three men they killed were mercenaries I'd hired as travel guards. They were quick and brave and tried to protect us, but were unequal to the task..."

Then I noticed something.

Two of the men who'd fallen near the building's door, despite being dressed the same way the old man was, smelled distinctly like me—that is to say, men ready to fight.

"But I cannot abandon my journey here. I must...press on," said Giuseppe firmly before a coughing fit stopped him.

I had a bad feeling about this.

I quivered, a quiet whimper in my throat, but my master seemed not to hear it. She made a sympathetic face, then extended her hand to Giuseppe. "What is your destination?" she asked.

Master! Never in all my life had I been so vexed by my inability to use human words. Were we not on our way to the town of Kuskov so that my master could make her dreams come true? And

did not misfortune befall travelers constantly, laying them low on the roadside every day? Thus, it was folly to put the goals of others before one's own goals—there would be no end of it!

Though I sat there obediently, I watched Giuseppe and my master alike very closely as such worries chased themselves through my mind.

Giuseppe coughed. "My apologies. My destination was..."

Once she heard it, there would be no way for her to resist helping. I felt as though I had to do something, anything, but I could not shut the man's mouth.

Giuseppe quietly finished his statement. "...Kuskov."

"Huh?"

My ears pricked up, and I looked at my master, who seemed likewise surprised.

"Are you familiar with it? It is a town beset by plague, without God's teachings or guidance; a town suffering in darkness."

"Y-yes. We were on our way there ourselves."

"Oh!" Giuseppe's face showed evidence of deep shock, and then, like all Church men do when praying to their God, he closed his eyes. I wagged my tail in amusement, for what Giuseppe said next was precisely what I had expected. "This must be God's will...though it cannot but pain me to say so. Might I ask you to hear this one request of a servant of God?"

I looked first at Giuseppe's face, then back to my master's. She was looking at him very seriously, as though ready to be given some important mission.

Even if I could have used human words, it would have been impossible to stop her.

"Yes, anything."

At these words, Giuseppe closed his eyes again and spoke. "Would you escort us to Kuskov?"

My master gave a firm nod and took Giuseppe's hand.

A bit weary of my master's excessive kindness, I sat down, facing the inn as it burned to the ground.

"I see. So you're heading to Kuskov to become a crafter..."

"Yes. I got word about the town from traveling merchants."

"Ah, I see. I should think it would require a great deal of courage to journey all the way to Kuskov...but please excuse my rudeness—you clearly posses a great measure of bravery and righteousness."

Giuseppe was riding his horse. The young man was still unconscious and had been placed on the stout little mule they'd brought with them as a pack animal.

"No, in truth I'm terrified, but...it's a dream I was sure I could never reach, so now that I have this chance..." My master spoke rather bashfully because it was the truth.

"Your dream, eh? It's true one needs hopes and dreams in order to face danger. You have nothing to be ashamed of." Atop his horse, Giuseppe smiled kindly, and my master looked up at him with respect in her eyes.

I was not terribly amused by any of this.

"I, too, am making for Kuskov in service of a dream of sorts. When the plague came, all of God's servants were called to heaven, and none remained to light candles anew. So we decided to come, to serve as lamps for those trembling in the darkness."

"I see..."

"I began this journey ready to face any horror in that town, but I never thought the horrors would begin while my journey was not yet over." He spoke not with sadness but rather exhaustion. A tired smile was on his face, which I found somehow reassuring.

I remembered that when this man had thought his life was at its end, he did not beg or plead for it, nor did he panic. He only looked to the heavens and prayed.

I could not forgive the Church, but I respected anyone so dedicated to their profession. On that count, this Giuseppe could not be such a bad human.

"As you can see, I am nothing more than a humble bishop, and I cannot give you anything of worth in return for your aid. But I would very much like to do what I can."

"Oh no, you needn't—" said my master hastily, but Giuseppe only gave an indulgently stubborn smile.

"I very nearly lost my life at the hands and blades of those men. You saved me, even as I was on my way to bring aid to those waiting in the darkness for God's light. It is a thing heavy with import, and I hope you'll at least allow me to repay the actions of your brave friend."

"You mean... Enek?"

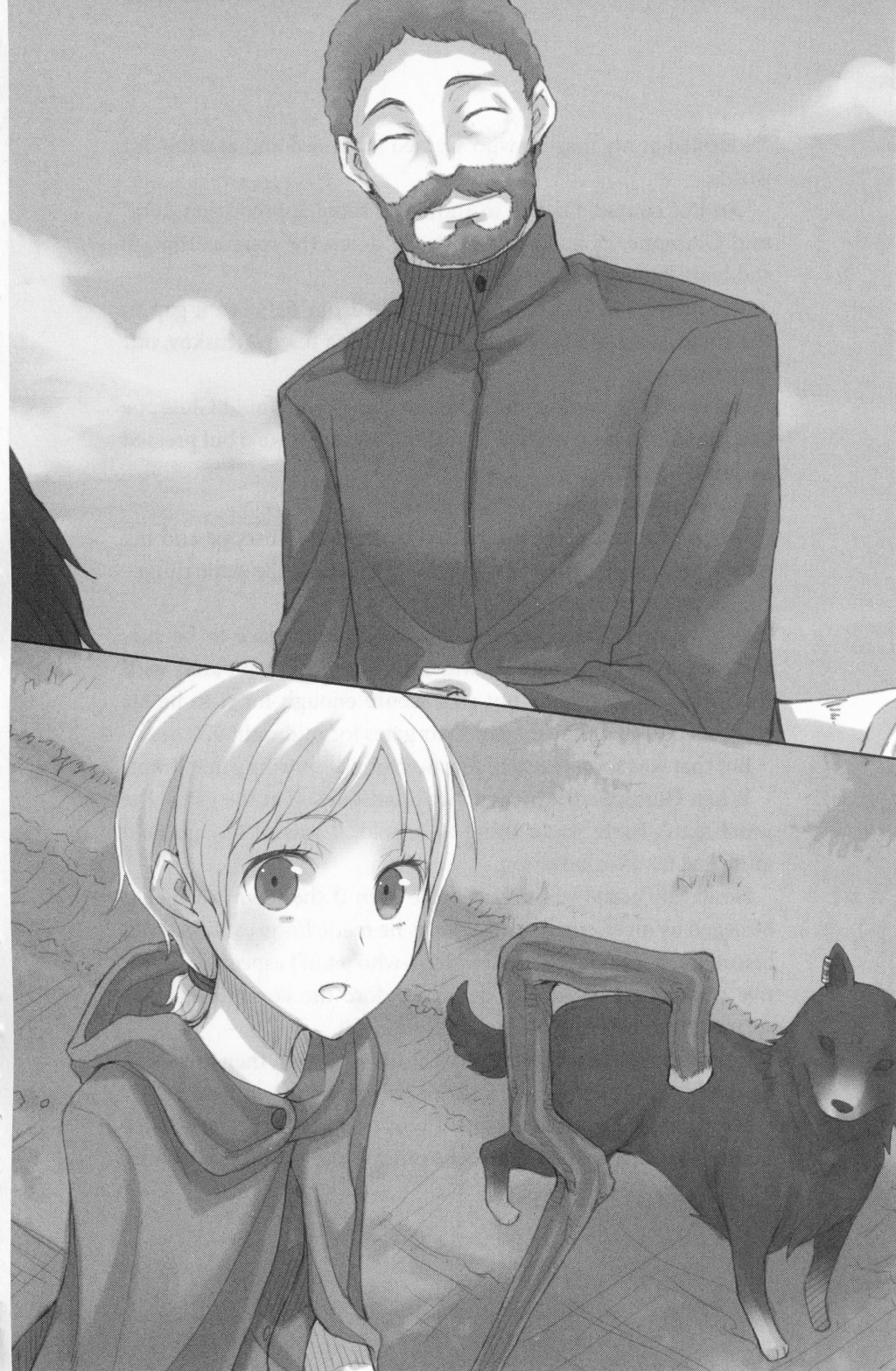
I, too, did not expect this, and I looked up to see an honest smile directed at me from Giuseppe, which took me still further by surprise. Being an animal, the only person I expected such smiles from was my master herself.

"God made this world and all things in it. Humans and all other things are the same in God's eyes. Thus, I feel it only right to give names to the blades of grass, show kindness to horses and birds alike, and to properly honor those who show such noble bravery."

I looked up at my master, and she looked down at me. Then both of us looked to Giuseppe, whereupon the wounded bishop smiled happily and continued on.

"When we arrive in Kuskov, I, Giuseppe Ozenstein, in the name of God, will confer upon the noble Enek the title of Knight of the Church."

I had not the faintest notion of what that meant, but if I was being dubbed a knight, I had no cause to refuse.



I looked at my master, who seemed surprised and at a loss for words.

"And of course, I'd like to show *you* some appreciation, too," said Giuseppe, as he looked abruptly down the road as though suddenly having realized something.

The moon was just then peeking out from between a gap in the clouds, and at the end of our gazes lay a town—Kuskov, our destination.

It seemed we wouldn't have had to camp, nor would Giuseppe and his fellows have needed to stay in that inn, if we'd but pressed on just a bit farther.

The world is a strangely fated place.

When I looked up at the pained smile that Giuseppe and my master were sharing, I knew they were thinking the same thing.

The town of Kuskov was a sufficiently grand place to be surrounded by a stone wall. It was nothing to be compared with Ruvinheigen, of course, but still secure enough for it to be far from certain that they'd open their gates for midnight visitors.

But that was soon revealed for the groundless worry that it was.

When Giuseppe the bishop identified himself at the gates, the watchman's haste was a thing to behold. It was as though he'd glimpsed his own salvation.

He hardly could've hurried more even if the town was being besieged by an enemy's army, and as he made his great fuss, even before the door opened, my master—who wasn't especially assertive at the best of times—quailed before the commotion that seemed to be brewing on the other side of it.

If the town was so desperate for the bishop's visit, then there was no doubt they'd welcome his savior with the same enthusiasm.

My master's face told eloquently of her worries. When there finally sounded a horn blast from inside the town, she seemed

unable to endure it any further. She looked up at Giuseppe, who rubbed his face and cleared his throat atop his horse, attempting to hide his own wounded condition.

"E-er, if you please..."

"Yes, my child?"

"Er, that is, I have a favor to ask..."

Giuseppe's face was that of a shepherd leading his flock. "What is that?" he asked. Men of the Church often hid their blackness beneath such expressions, but it seemed to encourage my master, who continued.

"Would you introduce us as merely your followers, please...?"

"That's...," began Giuseppe, blinking in surprise, but then he nodded slowly. He didn't seem to be a fool at least.

As we heard the sound of the bar being lifted hastily on the other side of the door, Giuseppe, still on his horse, leaned toward my master and spoke to her in a loud whisper. "It gives me great pleasure to see you living so faithfully by God's word. Courage and modesty are rarely seen together. I shall honor your request. But neither God nor I shall forget to whom we owe thanks."

Slowly the door opened, and from behind it came torchlight so bright it nearly hurt our eyes. Giuseppe straightened, and my master watched him like a lamb hoping to be saved.

I couldn't help but regard Giuseppe's skill and poise as somewhat suspicious, but when he gave me a glance and a small nod, I couldn't stop my tail from wagging.

Every rule had its exceptions.

"Now then," said Giuseppe, smiling like a child entrusted with a secret as the door came fully open. The hour being what it was, the people lined up beyond the door were dressed in whatever they'd been wearing, many of them seemingly having woken just minutes earlier—some of the girls were still combing their hair.

From out of the gathered crowd, pushing his way out from

between two men, came a well-dressed fellow holding a spear. He was probably on lookout duty, though he looked very young for it. From the redness in the corners of his eyes, he'd very clearly been sleeping until moments ago.

But his hair was curly and flyaway, and from the fluttering leather cloak over his shoulders, the pointed toes of his boots, and his confident stride, he had the feeling of a leader about him, too.

To show my respect I sat and put my front paws closely together, my chest thrust out, as I could tell he was doing his utmost to appear worthy of it. There was no questioning his desire to heal the town. But it was an extremely heavy burden.

I couldn't imagine that this youngster had arrived in this position ready to shoulder it. Plague took the elderly first, after all.

"My name is Tory lon Kuskov Careca. I represent the Kuskov Disaster Council. In God's name, we welcome you to our town."

His voice was youthful. Giuseppe knew the town's circumstances as well as we did and was probably thinking the same thing we were. He responded with a greeting more formal than he'd used with us.

"My apologies for remaining on my horse. We have received the letter the blessed town of Kuskov sent seeking the light of God's holy candle. God has not abandoned you. Though my power is weak, God's is great. Be at peace. Beginning today, yea in this very hour, God's light will surely return to this town."

His voice carried well. All assembled lent their ears to him, and after Giuseppe finished speaking, there was utter and complete silence.

Then, like a rising wave, the cheer was quiet at first but finished in a great roar, as though he had just delivered news of a long war finally at an end.

"You must be tired, Bishop. You and your companion should

rest yourselves tonight...," said the lengthily named Careca, approaching Giuseppe. As he did so, he seemed to finally notice. "Bishop, you look unwell..."

"Care for this one before me, if you would," said Giuseppe, indicating behind him, whereupon Careca seemed to notice the mule for the first time.

His almost girlish features froze in dismay. "Someone! Help me treat him!" cried Careca, and the happily chattering crowd again fell silent as they finally realized why the bishop would be arriving in their town at such a late hour. Visitors who came knocking on their doors having narrowly escaped bandits in the night were not so very rare, after all.

Even my master and I had encountered such people while tending our flocks. The bishop was helped down from his horse by the many people who quickly rushed to his side, and he quietly explained the extent of his injuries.

Those who attended to the man on the mule seemed to have battlefield experience. No sooner had they seen his wounds than they began giving instructions to the women.

As for us, Giuseppe honored his promise and explained our presence as he said he would. Careca contented himself to give us only brief thanks.

Given that I'd fought so bravely and driven so much danger off, this was a bit unsatisfying, but Giuseppe would hardly forget the debt he owed us, and most importantly my master understood. My master patted gave my head a hearty rub. "Let's try to stay out of the way," she said, and we moved over to the side of the entrance to the town.

Given all this fuss, if my master were to tell the truth of how she came to the bishop's rescue, no doubt her dream of becoming a seamstress would easily come true.

So it felt to me a bit of a waste for her not to take the credit, but

at the same time I could not help but respect her honest modesty. I looked up at her, and she noticed my gaze.

"What's the matter?"

I could not use human speech, and thus did not respond to her question. And anyway, I was my master's servant and would never do something so distasteful as proclaiming her greatness myself.

I looked away from her and watched Giuseppe be led away, whereupon I felt a sudden weight on my head. When I looked, I saw that it was my master's hand.

"I don't suppose you're waiting for a feast to be laid out to thank us, hmm?"

Ah, lamentations! I gave a quiet bark to voice my indignation. My master could occasionally be rather mean-spirited—or perhaps that was how I truly looked.

I felt wounded, and she drew me close in a sudden embrace.

Once Giuseppe was led away, there was no longer anyone near the gate. We seemed to have been utterly forgotten, which probably made my delicate master feel a bit lonely.

Her face was right by mine, so I licked it, and she giggled. "I was waiting for it a bit, too."

My master can be surprisingly indulgent when it comes to food—but as they say, no fish are had from water too clean.

I licked my master's cheek again and gave a short bark.

TWO

The fresh-baked wheat bread generously dipped in oil tasted like a cloud on the tongue, and the sliced beef, first blanched, then roasted, was luxurious as well. My life was a simple one, but my weakness was delicious food, and I was well satisfied.

The only thing that I found dissatisfying was the amount of food, and I finished mine quickly. My master noticed me licking the dish, and laughing, she gave me another slice of beef.

"Not enough, is it?"

She knew me too well.

I accepted it gratefully and rubbed my head against her leg.

"They say we needn't worry about the bill for room and board."

My master did not lick the plate as I did, but is not so dainty as to let the meat drippings go to waste. She sopped them up with a piece of bread and smiled a contented smile.

"Though I heard them saying in the kitchen they'd give us rye bread for dinner," said my master mischievously, which made me sigh a long-suffering sigh and lie down on my belly. "The town's in a bad spot, after all. This might really be the last of the good bread they have."

I only tilted one ear toward my master's voice. I didn't bother raising my head to look at her, because I could not imagine her face wore a particularly cheerful expression. Instead of looking up at her, I settled for licking her ankle.

"Hey!" she said, poking me with her toes—my master is ticklish, you see.

It happened often that she would cut her legs on the grass of the fields, and there was never any guarantee that there would be water handy to wash the wound. In such times I had no choice but to lick them clean, which would make her face go red—not because she was trying to bear the pain, but rather because she was trying not to laugh. When she cut her foot on a stone, my licking would be so ticklish that she couldn't help herself, and she would end up kicking my face away reflexively.

And yet she seemed to enjoy stroking my back with her bare feet. She ate the last bite of bread and chewed it contentedly while rubbing her feet against my coat.

"Now then." Having enjoyed the lingering taste of the meal, she stood. "We should visit the church first and then maybe the trading house."

After stacking her dishes she put on her coat, and after a moment's hesitation she left her bell-less staff leaning against a wall. It was one thing while out in the fields, but walking around with a long staff inside a town was a good way to attract strange looks. People would think her a fortune-teller or a sorcerer—or a shepherd.

While I myself still held pride in the shepherd's work, I felt something like resignation toward the prejudice the human world had for our vocation. No doubt my master, being human herself, felt that even more keenly, and her face as she left her staff at the wall looked lonely and uncertain.

"Mm... it will be all right," she finally said, after I nudged her leg with my snout.

Though my master has never said so aloud, one of the reasons she wished to become a seamstress was to have work where no fingers would be pointed at her behind her back. I could hardly blame her; indeed, it seemed quite reasonable to me.

Her only conversation partners had been myself and the sheep, and so it had been only animals to whom she had directed her smiles. This was the shepherd's tendency, and so perhaps it was inevitable that baseless rumor about shepherds' children being half-beast, half-human would arise.

And such rumors only made shepherds lonelier, and eventually the resentment between them and the people of the towns only grew.

Perhaps my master had long since grown to hate other humans. I certainly wondered about it.

"It's fine, it's fine! Come now." She smiled and held my face between her hands.

I was well aware of what her stiffened cheeks meant. It was the human way of smiling. But I was not a human and could not so smile.

"... I'm sorry, that was a lie. To be honest, I'm very worried."

I hardly needed to ask what she was worried about.

She hated being thanked by others so much that she'd made that request of Giuseppe just before entering the town. It had been painful to watch her perform her gratefulness for this inn treating her as an honored guest.

By leaving her staff behind, it meant that she was going into the town not as a shepherdess, but as an ordinary traveler.

But would she be able to act like a normal human?

No one was more concerned about that than my master.

"Still," she said, her voice stronger as she looked up. "We must keep moving forward."

A strong person is not one without weakness. It is one who can prevail over that weakness.

I let out a bark, and my master stood.

Emerging into the town of Kuskov during the hours of darkness painted it a ruined, abandoned place, but even after the sun rose, that impression did not change much. The inn at which we'd been so welcomed faced the town's main avenue, but right or left it was desolate all the same, and buildings' windows stayed shuttered closed.

There were few people on the street, and every one of them seemed to walk as though trying to hide the sound of their footsteps.

I wasn't sure if my master could tell, but I caught the scent of death in the air, and a close look at the rubbish heaps in the street corners revealed bones.

In stark contrast to the townspeople here, on the street lounged a fat dog that watched us suspiciously as we passed. Beside it waddled a fat rat. No doubt the truth of what it was upon which they had grown so fat was something none of the townspeople wished to speak.

I could tell my master had noticed, because she walked even closer to me than she did when we were passing through a wolf-filled forest.

The only people on the streets we passed who showed any amount of cheer were those who seemed to be merchants who'd come from elsewhere—men who barely cared about their own lives so long as they were making profit, to say nothing of the lives of others. Small wonder, then, they were able to work in a town beset by such circumstances as though it were any other town.

As I was mulling this over, the sounds of a commotion reached my ears.

I looked ahead and saw a crowd of people gathered around a building with a familiar symbol adorning it. It was the town's church.

Of course, the assembled had all come seeking some sort of solace. Ironically, from all the pushing and shoving they were doing to get into the church, it seemed unlikely that any of them would be finding peace anytime soon.

"Look at all the people," said my master, sincerely surprised. She was right—given the circumstances, it would probably be difficult to meet with Giuseppe. "I'd feel bad imposing. We'll come later."

That was what I had hoped she would decide. I gave my tail a wag to indicate my agreement.

It was not so very difficult to arrive at our next goal, the trading house. While the town was of a goodly size, the streets were so empty there was nothing to slow us down. We stopped to ask directions only twice, and after not much time at all we were there.

My master had called it simply the "trade house," but to be precise, it was the house of the Rowen Trade Guild. It wasn't only horses and sheep that formed flocks—humans did the same thing. People from the same town would form a group and take reasonable actions to ensure their mutual gain.

And then evidently, they had opened up trade houses in various towns, including this one.

When my master abandoned her career as a shepherdess, she had evidently done a favor for another branch of this guild, so in a matter of speaking she had a connection to this flock or pack. She even had something called a "letter of introduction" tucked into her breast. And still she stood in front of the building and took three deep breaths.

How many times had she felt near collapse during the incident that caused her to abandon shepherding?

I prodded her forward with my snout, and my master finally knocked on the door and went inside.

"Ah, welco—" The man did not continue, because my master hardly seemed suited to this place.

But my master had learned all too well how important it was to smile on the occasion of a first meeting like this. To someone like me who knows what her true smile looks like, the one she gave this man was a cold and obvious fake, but it seemed to be enough to fool its recipient.

"How might I help you?" said the man serenely, gesturing to a nearby chair. "The black-furred fellow's your companion, I trust?" he asked as I followed her in.

"Oh yes, er..."

"Oh, it's no trouble. I remember now. You arrived in the town yesterday, did you not? It's dangerous for a woman to travel alone, after all. That fellow might be more trustworthy than a hastily hired guard, truly," said the bearded man with a smile, which my master returned. "I asked because dogs aren't regarded particularly auspiciously in this town at the moment."

When a town is beset by plague, every street and alleyway begins to overflow with corpses. If one hears a crunching sound and opens the window to see what it is, one might see any number of dogs gnawing on the bodies. This is no more pleasant a fact for me than it is for humans.

My master sat down on the chair, and I situated myself beside her as she stroked my head, awkwardly acknowledging the man's words.

"So, then, might I ask what brings a traveler like you to this trade house?"

The good thing about merchants is that they get right to the point. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who thought so.

Having sat on the chair, my master hastily produced the letter from her breast and slid it across the counter toward the man.

Evidently, a letter can hold a terrible power in the human world. Somehow, my master didn't need to fear quitting her work as a shepherdess, nor providing for her living expenses, all because of that letter.

"Ah, this is... Ah, you're from Ruvinheigen? That's quite a long ways away, indeed."

"I was in the care of a trader named Jakob."

"I see. Well, I'll do what I can not to be bested by that bearded old man, eh?" said the man smiling widely, but then he seemed to notice my master's troubled expression. He cleared his throat deliberately and shifted in his seat. "Ahem. Welcome to the Kuskov branch of the Rowen Trade Guild. My name is Aman Guwingdott. I shall do what I can to assist you, such that your memories of this town are good ones, and the name of the Rowen Trade Guild might continue to brightly shine."

Merchants truly were excellent actors.

My master straightened and, bowing politely, she introduced herself. The two soon shook hands.

"Now then, Miss Norah, you wish to become a seamstress?"

"Yes. I have heard that this town is shorthanded right now."

"Indeed, that's certainly true. This plague is not enough to crush Kuskov. It will surely recover." My master smiled an uncomplicated smile upon hearing Aman's firm statement, but then a shadow passed over his expression, and he continued, "However, your timing may not be ideal."

"... What do you mean?"

"Yes, well, the people of Kuskov certainly ought to be

grateful that you've braved the plague to come, but...," said Aman uncomfortably before seeming to decide that there was nothing for it but to come right out and speak his mind. "While the plague is lifting from this town, it's still in a wretched state, as you can plainly see. Commerce here has been dealt a terrible blow and is still in a very bad way. Far from needing new craftsmen, the ones that are already here find themselves leaving town to find work. It's good that you came to call, though, I believe. The town will surely recover, and when it does, there will be a need for workers."

This was a very different reality from what we had been led to believe, but so it went with information gained from travelers. My master listened as though carefully swallowing each word, and when he finished, she gave a firm nod.

"A seamstress, you said? I'll write a letter of introduction to the head of the clothiers' guild, then. It's the very least I can do." He followed his words with a lighthearted and clearly calculated smile.

Still, being able to act the way Aman did, in the face of the damage the plague had done to the town, was proof of his courage. My master gratefully accepted the letter and bowed her head several times. She'd made her living by discerning the moods of others and had grasped what was expected of her.

We put the trade guild behind us, impressed by the kindness Aman had shown us despite the difficult times.

After we'd followed Aman's directions, another building stood before us a short while later. In its stone walls was set an iron plate embossed with the image of a needle and thread, and even a dog like myself could tell that we had found our destination.

My master knocked this time without any hesitation, but it seemed she just couldn't get away from bad timing. Though she'd managed to get up the courage to promptly knock at the door, there didn't seem to be anybody on the other side.

"Perhaps...they're out," she said, crestfallen, but I couldn't reply to everything she said.

I scratched my neck with my hind leg and yawned a great yawn.

My master seemed to intuit my reaction to her words from my inaction. She slumped. "I suppose there's nothing to be done about it," she said. I barked my agreement, but the moment we turned to leave, my master gasped.

What was it?

The moment I stood and began to turn, my field of vision swam wildly. I'd made a mistake. Something had taken me by surprise.

My back hit the ground, and my forepaws paddled in the air—but not for long. I closed my hind legs and twisted my body, and they bit the earth. The only things capable of surprising me were a hawk on the wing or something using a way of fighting no animal was capable of.

In other words, a human with a thrown weapon—and the thing that impacted my head seems to be a strange tube-shaped object.

"Enek!" shouted my master sharply, and my body went tense—but the tension within me did not burst, because my master's voice was not meant to set me upon my attacker, but rather to stop me from striking.

I stumbled, and looked up. *Master, I was surely attacked!*

"Wait, please!" But these words were not directed at me. "We are merely travelers, and this dog is my companion!" My master held me to make certain I didn't leap and attack, but she could not stop me from growling.

My growl was meant for my attacker, because having met the young woman's eyes, I did not imagine that mere words would suffice.

"..."

She had dark eyes, dark like a muddy pond, and was tall and

thin. Her sharp, unflinching gaze pierced me from behind her unkempt red hair. I could not begin to guess at what thoughts lay behind those eyes, and so I did not stop my growl.

But as my master held me back, she hastily produced the letter from her breast, and the woman's eyes wavered slightly.

"I wish to speak with the master of the clothiers' guild—."

I couldn't tell whether the woman was listening to what my master said or not. She closed her eyes for a moment, then looked askance, and finally began to walk away.

My master, too, seemed not to know what the woman's intentions were, and her embrace of me only grew tighter.

But the woman only went to pick up the tube-shaped object she'd hit my head with, not even glancing at us all the while. She walked past us and put her hand to the door and finally spoke.

"So you're the 'girl who brought the lamp,' are you...?" She looked my master up and down in an obviously appraising fashion, then continued, "Are you coming in?"

Her gaze still had that ineffably muddy look to it. It was a scent I'd caught before, something like dark mud mixed with ink. It caught the legs of those who tried to stand, held the shins of those who tried to walk.

Plague did not only claim lives; it also claimed hope.

The young woman's red hair was bound back like a horse's tail, and it swayed as she entered the dark building. As she disappeared into the gloom, my ears caught the next words very distinctly.

"I am the master of this guild."

I wondered if my master had heard as well.

I looked up at her, she who stood right next to me, and it seemed that she had.

Somehow this young woman with her strange gaze had found herself in this lofty position. That was what it meant when half a town died in a plague.

Still, my master stood and nudged me forward, and we went into the building.

The gloom inside the building combined with the woman's strangeness gave it an unsettling feeling, but upon entering it was found surprisingly neat inside. The furnishings were plain but well made and were fragrant from the oil, with which they'd been carefully polished; likewise, the shelves affixed to the walls were well fitted.

I finally realized that the object that hit my head was a bolt of cloth, just as the woman reappeared from a room farther in the building.

"...So, what is your business here?"

She didn't even bother with an introduction. My master quickly handed over the letter of introduction she received from Aman, at which the woman scratched her head in irritation, then walked abruptly over to a window. She didn't seem brusque so much as she seemed to be trying to suppress her own emotions. She was merely opening the window to let in sufficient light to read, it turned out, but her every motion was sharp and irritable.

At the very least, she seemed to harbor hostility toward travelers, which I knew my master felt much more keenly than I.

I saw that the woman's legs were trembling.

If a wolf's fangs killed the body, then human hostility was death to the spirit.

"Hmph. A seamstress, eh?"

"I-if I might be so bold," said my master with haste, just as the woman spoke.

I might not be human, but I knew my master very well. She fears being despised by others more than almost anything else. Her hands were balled up into tight fists as she tried to push that fear down. This must have been what humans call "pathos."

"...Be my guest."

"Please, ma'am! I've got a bit of an eye for wool, at least, so... er...?"

"Like I said, be my guest," said the woman in a bored tone as she tossed the letter onto the table.

My master seemed stunned, unable to find the next words to speak. Her mouth opened and closed, and she looked like a mistreated puppy.

"So?" The woman sat in a chair, looking much older than she was. She looked at the table, which was now illuminated by the light coming in through the window. From my low vantage point I could not see what was on it, but I saw the end of a tube poking out from one edge of the table and guessed that it was the bolt of cloth that had struck my head.

No doubt the other tools one needed for tailoring were on the table as well.

"Ah...no...er..." My master evaded the woman's gaze and stumbled over her words as she tried to find a reply. She seemed on the verge of tears, and I glared at the woman with all the anger I felt.

"What? You want a test, then?" sneered the woman. She had realized why my master was hesitating.

My master's thin body flinched away, and though I knew she had enough courage to face even the fearsome wolf's howl, she couldn't help but tremble at this woman's obvious malice.

"By all means, go right ahead. Cut cloth, sew seams, thread needles. You could even ready the dye for fur treatment. Shall I see if you have the skill to become a member of the Clothiers' Guild of Kuskov? I, Guild Chief Ars Vidt?"

My master could not manage any sort of reply when faced with the anger of the woman who'd introduced herself as Ars. She was cowed and overwhelmed and stumbled back awkwardly.

"Sadly, we have no materials with which to work. Oh, certainly, if you want broken buttons, fraying thread, and bent, rusted needles, we've plenty of those. Though we can't test you with those, can we? So what do you suppose we should do, hmm?"

Ars laughed, but not because she was happy. It was because if she didn't smile, the unbearable bitterness inside her would come rushing out. The wisdom my years had given me helped me to understand just why the woman Ars was acting this way.

But my master did not have that understanding. Despite being overwhelmed by Ars's sharp tongue, she summoned her courage and tried to press on—without having the slightest understanding of Ars's mind.

"I-if it's money, I have—"

I knew Ars's rage even before it appeared upon her face.

"Money! Hah! You suppose what you need can be bought with money? I suppose so! But listen, you—if all you need is beautiful buttons, beautiful cloth, and beautiful needles, you can have all of that without a single coin!" Ars pounded the table as she ranted. My master shrank away, frozen by the woman's terrible force.

Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do to help her—because I understood why Ars was so angry.

She continued her raging. "Just turn the scriptures upside down and curse the name of God; then dig up the graves of the dead and scavenge their corpses!"

Such terrible sarcasm.

It was the practice of humans to bury their dead. They were usually buried in fine clothes, along with some valuable object or another. It was said that death was the beginning of an eternal journey, and if the many dead, in their finery, had departed from the town, then in a way their death was itself a sort of plunder.

As the thought came to me, I realized that I was mistaken to

be impressed with the neatness of the room. The room was not neat—it was bereft.

The raging, exhausted Ars slumped over the table, then looked up with a thin smile. "But if you have money, how about it? You might at least pay the guild membership fee, eh?"

It was a chilling smile, like she'd taken a short sword in her hands and cut it into her own face. Imagine, if you will, a face more gentle and mild than any beast's could ever be twisted by such bestial rage.

Nothing good could come of this.

Worried for my master's safety, I took the hem of her robe in my mouth and tugged. They say a drowning person will grasp even at straw. Who was to say that Ars, drowning in the despair the plague had wrought in her town, would not try to grab my master's leg?

At the tug I gave her robe, my master seemed to return to herself. That moment, a drop of water fell on my snout. It was very salty.

"Come... you have money, don't you?"

My master took a step back, then another step, unconsciously touching my head. It was as though she were facing a wolf in a dark forest.

Even if she couldn't see her surroundings, no matter how much danger lurked, so long as she could be certain I was at her side, she would not fear.

But what faced her now was a human whose hostility was more terrifying than the fangs of any wolf. Ars stood unsteadily. It felt like whatever lurked within her was about to take form and explode. I crouched, readying to leap at her.

The situation was on the verge of explosion.

Then there was a rough knock at the dry wooden door. "Ars! Ars Vidt!" A young-sounding man called Ars's name.



A frightened, cornered bird finds it hard to take flight. Ars made a sour face and turned away, sitting roughly back down in the chair as she clucked her tongue.

The banging at the door continued, and seemingly hurried by the sound, my master turned and ran toward it. I dutifully followed, but couldn't help heaving a disappointed sigh.

"Ars! I know you're in there! The stock purchase advances, get them together and—" The door opened with a suddenness, and the sound of the man's shouting hit my ears.

My master was just about to put her hand to the door to open it herself, and she drew back in surprise.

"Whoops—" said the man on the other side of the door, his eyes going wide. His face was a rather amiable one. But the next thing he saw after my master was me, and he froze in his tracks.

I was perfectly happy to take advantage of that and slipped past my master to emerge outside.

The man who opened the door was a head taller than my master and fairly young himself. As I moved past him, he recoiled as though from something on fire.

Once outside, I calmly turned around, and at my bark, my master finally came to join me.

The man seemed about to say something to her, but at a glare from me he shrank back; and then, as though to mask his fear, he turned his gaze back inside the building. I didn't know who he was, but there was no mistaking the unpleasant metallic smell about him. He put his hand to the door and looked back at my master one more time, then fully entered the building and closed the door behind him. I heard no voices after that, and my master and I were left standing in the middle of the street. The only reason I didn't start walking was because my master still couldn't bring herself to grasp the series of events that had just befallen her.

Even faced with a sudden, inexplicable accident or encounter, my master had always been able to cling to her staff—her work as a shepherdess. But now that staff was back at the inn.

This left her a simple traveling girl instead of a shepherdess of such skill that some called her a witch.

As it sank into her, she was on the verge of tears, and I did not bark to try and startle her out of it.

Instead, as she started to walk unsteadily along, I nuzzled against her ankles, and when she reached out to pet my head, I was there.

"...Enek," said my master to me just as the sun was beginning to set. "I'm...awful, aren't I."

My master could probably count on a single hand the number of times she had slept in a real bed. And one of those times, she quite literally cried herself to sleep. Her voice was hoarse, so she may very well have been crying while she slept, too.

Just as I was thinking this, my master stepped over where I was lying by the bed and drank some water from a pitcher.

"Half the town died in the plague, after all."

The copper pitcher was blackened and rusted with age and dented here and there from hard use. I could only be impressed that it didn't leak.

And of course, I was even more surprised by my master, who, despite being confronted with such hostility, was so kindhearted that she didn't think ill of Ars.

"..."

She held the pitcher in silence for a while, and just when I thought she was going to go back to bed, she rubbed my back with her foot and came to sit on the bed's edge.

"I suppose I can't become a merchant."

Merchants lie, cheat, and steal as a matter of course. It was a

different sort of courage from that of my master, who would gut a sheep if need be. It was fundamentally impossible for her to take advantage of someone else for her own profit.

I sniffed at my master's nose. It was free of dirt and dust for the first time in a long time, but she pulled it away as though surprised.

"So many people died... and I was thinking only of myself."

She fell backward onto the bed, and from the sound of rustling fabric that immediately followed, I could tell she was curling up under the covers.

Goodness me.

If she wasn't so inclined to blame herself, her life would have been a little bit easier.

Still.

"Mm... Enek?"

Still, I cannot deny that I like the way she is. That was the source of her most basic sincerity.

"I'm fine... I'm fine, mm... Eek, that tickles... Hey, you!"

I poked and played with her, and after perhaps three rounds of attack and defense, my master gathered me up in an embrace, nuzzling her face into my neck. "We can't stop. Can we?"

There was nothing I loved so much as the sight of her profile as she walked a field all by herself. I gave a growl and a bark, and she embraced me again, almost painfully tight, and then released me.

"Let's go see the bishop." Her eyes were red from crying, but her smile was a genuine one. "Besides, giving our confession to a priest might do us some good, eh?" she continued, busily making herself ready to leave. She didn't notice the way I'd curled my tail up, asking her if I was not strong enough for her.

Master!

"Come, don't give me that look! Playtime is over!"

I have never been more grateful than I was in that moment not to have the ability to speak!

Upon leaving the inn, the sky was red. In our previous life, we would soon have been making ready to sleep.

My master yawned a small yawn as we walked, no doubt the trace of the sleepiness she felt having cried herself past exhaustion. She noticed my glance and turned away, trying to cover up her yawn.

The streets were as deserted as they had been earlier, but bathed in the light of the setting sun, they now seemed somehow even sadder. My master had no love for dusk, and as we walked alone through the empty streets, all the while she kept her hand on the back of my neck.

But I could not blame her for that. I, too, dislike dusk. If you would ask me what about it I find distasteful, I would answer straightaway that it's the length of the shadows. Atop a small hill and facing the sunset, how long my master's shadow could grow! Such shadows made it difficult to discern the true size of things and made me pointlessly wary. At sunset, even sheep have shadows of terrifying length.

In these deserted streets the only shadows were our own, and even so, I could not shake a certain unease about them. Eventually I sensed another presence in the street, and there met the wary gaze of a stray dog. My master finally let slip a sigh of relief when we arrived at the church and there, finally, saw the faces of other people. I understood her relief all too well.

"I hope the bishop is all right," said my master.

I wouldn't have had an answer for her even if she'd asked me, but given his condition the previous night, only God knew whether he would recover or not.

Human bodies were fragile.

I could hardly fail to notice the deep breath my master quietly took. Her strained expression was the proof of her resolve not to quail, no matter how poorly Giuseppe might be faring.

"Ah, you're the girl...," came a voice addressing my master no sooner than we had entered the church.

A group of plump women were gathered inside the open doors of the church, whispering about something.

From what little knowledge I have, given the white cloth covering their arms and heads, they were probably responsible for caring for the two important men who'd come to their church.

With such sturdy-looking people looking after one, it was easy to imagine how the feelings of weakness that threatened to extinguish one's light might be brushed aside.

"Er, I thought I might ask after the condition of the bishop."

"Ah, I see. He's calmed now and is sleeping. Despite that terrible wound, he was up offering prayers until just a moment ago."

Among beasts and among humans, if there is a group greater than three, there will be a leader. The sturdiest woman spoke, and the others merely followed her lead and nodded.

"Was the wound so very bad, then?"

"It was. When we were awaked and rushed here, we thought it wasn't too bad at first, but at his age... Still, the bishop has the protection of God, so he'll surely recover soon." She smiled a hearty smile as befit her robustness, one that would surely have elicited a smile from and given peaceful rest to a corpse. My master was terrible at false smiles, and even she found herself returning it.

"And, er... what of the other man?" My master stumbled over this question, as she had seen earlier how terrible his wounds had been.

"The wound to his head was not so very great a thing. There was a lot of blood from his head and nose, though, so it looked

worse than it was. He still hasn't woken up, but his color is good, so I think he'll be awake soon."

It was not so rare to hear of a sheep falling from a crag or creek, losing consciousness, and quietly dying without ever waking again.

In response to the woman's relaxed manner, my master nodded seriously. "Might I be able to visit the both of them?"

"Hmm? Oh, certainly. The bishop for his part has been unmovable from his holy duties, but still asked after you several times," said the woman, then paused and looked at me. "And your black knight here, too."

That had to be why the women hadn't seemed afraid when they'd looked at me. I was pleased with that, but for some reason my master seemed uncomfortable with me being called a knight. *Master, are you not proud of the praise I've earned?*

"Enek, a knight... I don't think..."

"Not at all! It's said that the actions of this little black knight of yours were very important in bringing the light of hope back to our town. The same is said for the young angel traveling with him, of course."

"Angel? Oh... n-no, I'm not an..." She blushed red up to her ears and looked down. She'd been called a spirit before, or a sprite, but always with a note of suspicion. Ever since then, she'd been unaccustomed to any sort of praise.

I was starting to become indirectly embarrassed from my master's own embarrassment, so I gave a bark and rubbed my nose against her leg.

"Ha-ha-ha! See, even your little knight agrees there's no cause for such humility."

"..."

She didn't seem able to put it into words, but as I looked at her still-downcast face, her expression was not displeased.

"Anyhow, feel free to go have a look at the bishop's sleeping face. They've both got rather beatific sleeping faces, you might know."

She spoke as though she were boasting about her own children, and I felt as though I understood why. The two men had returned hope to the town, and as such, were a source of pride. The good treatment my master and I had received was also due entirely to having brought that light here.

And of course, it was only proper that work be repaid, so we ought to have stood proudly and accepted the honor. But what would they have done if they knew my master had been a shepherd?

I prayed to the God that supposedly lived in this church that they would not ask how my master and I were connected.

"Right this way, then."

I left my prayers behind as the woman led my master and me farther into the church.

The man who'd employed us as shepherds was also a man of the church, and though we'd sometimes had occasion to enter a church, one could not call this one grand, not even as flattery.

Though it was made of sturdy stone, the lack of maintenance was all too obvious. There were cobwebbed niches where the candles had gone unlit for a duration, which made me wonder how long it had been since anyone had touched these stone walls.

The hinges of the wooden door that led to the room where the bishop lay had evidently rusted away; the door now leaned against the wall, and a simple cloth hung in the doorway in its stead.

Even if the town had deep faith, without a priest there, the items in the church must have been neglected.

"In here," the woman said in a voice suddenly much quieter than it had been a moment ago. She pulled the cloth aside and

gestured for my master to enter. I thought I might be barred, but the woman smiled and let me pass.

I elevated my opinion of her a bit.

"... It's only been a day, and he's so—"

I couldn't help but wonder if my master would have finished by saying "thin."

The woman nodded and for the first time let a worried-sounding sigh escape.

Evidently we hadn't mistaken the bishop's condition, despite the gloom. An injury can be enough to cause someone to weaken and waste away—and the bishop was not a young man to begin with.

My master clasped her hands, closed her eyes, and began to pray. I doubted I would ever forget the way the church had treated her before, so I couldn't bring myself to feel comfortable there. I sat down and waited. At the very least, Giuseppe bore no responsibility for my master's suffering. Far from it, he'd held me in properly high esteem, so I could not deny that I, too, hoped he recovered.

"... And may the blessing of God be upon you," my master finally murmured, then reached out to touch the sheet under which Giuseppe quietly slept. She then turned to face the woman. Humans are very talented with speech, but in such times a simple look was often more eloquent. The woman nodded and placed her hand on my master's shoulder, and the two of them left the room. I stood and turned to follow them, but then looked back around.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought I felt Giuseppe's eyes on me.

But his old body still lay asleep and unmoving there on the bed.

I was a sheepdog, who slept under the stars and felt the breath of the land on my body. I had an instinct for the movements of

the earth and the heavens. I was glad I could not speak, nor have the wealth of expressions that humans enjoy. Otherwise, I might not have been able to hide my feelings from my master.

On the other hand, his sleeping face had obviously been very peaceful, so perhaps Giuseppe's heart was peaceful as well.

This was not cause for sorrow.

I left the room and followed my master.

When two sparrows meet, noise follows.

So it should be no surprise that when humans (who are more talkative than any bird) assemble, a great commotion always comes with them.

As she'd gone to visit Giuseppe and his companion, whose name was evidently Rudeau Dorhof, it seemed the villagers would not let my master quietly return to her bed.

"Ah, so you're from Ruvinheigen, eh?... Where is that, incidentally?"

"I've heard of the place! They say the cathedral there is lit all night long thanks to God."

"Yes, yes! And I've heard they tan most of their leather there on tanning stones of gold."

"Gold?! Well, that's Ruvinheigen for you. Where was it again...?"

Thus it went, on and on, villagers either peppering my master with questions or talking over her among themselves.

I was lying beside my master and yawned a lazy yawn. The words coming out of their mouths were no different from the baaing of a flock of sheep, as far as I was concerned.

"Didn't Father Nico say the cathedral in the holy city of Ruvinheigen reaches all the way to the heavens?"

"He did, he did. He said the cathedral was so tall, his prayers were always being interrupted by angels passing by the windows!"

"I wonder how it really is?"

The conversation finally turned to my master, and I glanced up at her. She was smiling, but it was a pained smile, not a pleasant one.

"I suppose... that might be true."

It was true that the cathedral was tall enough that one had to look up to see it, and perhaps crows and sparrows could be counted as angels.

But if she'd denied that, it would've made a liar out of Father Nico. My master had learned these sorts of truths from hard experience.

No matter how dire the circumstances, it was never good to accuse a clergyman of lying.

"Indeed! I remember Father Nico saying he wanted to see Ruvinheigen one more time before he died."

"But still, Bishop Giuseppe has been there many times himself, and this time passed through it on his way to this very town. And it was Miss Norah, who once worked at the Ruvinheigen Church, who led him here. I can't help but suppose that God heard Father Nico's prayers," said a woman, and all present nodded firmly.

Then they all ardently sought to shake my master's hand again, saying "Thank you" over and over again.

This all made my master very uneasy, either because she was not used to being thanked or because her experience led her to feel uncomfortable with even the small lie of having "worked at the church."

Grain millers, shepherds, tanners—all were despised just as thoroughly as executioners and tax collectors. If she was to let slip the truth here, all the smiles she received would be strained ones, and none would have any warmth in them.

And in any case, my master wasn't lying by saying she worked at the church. She simply wasn't telling the whole truth.

It wasn't even untrue that she was to thank for Giuseppe's arrival in this town. I felt that if the town was going to treat us with such overflowing gratitude, we ought to accept it with all pride... but that was difficult for my master.

For my part, as I participated in this discussion, I received a pork sausage, albeit one that was about to go bad. Thanks are so much more substantial when they come with something more.

"Still," asked a woman after the questions abated. "Why were you coming here in the first place? Hadn't you heard the rumors?"

We had finally come to the heart of the matter, I thought, which illustrated the difference in our respective priorities.

My master and I were homeless wanderers. We were less concerned with the happenings of the next town over than we were about whether or not there was someone at our side. For someone who lived in the same place their entire life, the opposite was true.

"Yes, I'd heard."

"So why did you come? Was it because—did God tell you to?"

The conversation had jumped in a strange direction, and the other women's expressions were changing.

Unsurprisingly, my master hastily demurred. But in doing so, she would have to reveal her true reason, and she looked down at me. I was certain she was remembering how Ars, chief of the clothiers' guild, had treated her. If my master admitted she'd come here looking for work, she might be given quite a tongue-lashing.

Until that very moment, even she seemed about to be overwhelmed by the conversation around her; at least it had been pleasant. I couldn't blame her for being desperate to preserve that mood.

Unfortunately, I was in no position to come to her aid. I curled up my tail and drooped my head.

"Oh, there she is!" came the sole man's voice, cutting through

the voices of all the women. In that moment, the mood of the place changed instantly.

It was as though they were a flock of sheep stunned into silence by the sound of a wolf's footfalls.

First my master was surprised by this, and only a moment later did she follow all the women's gazes to their end.

There was the man who'd interrupted us at the guild house earlier that day. He was looking at my master, waving his hand.

"What're *you* doing here, you devil!"

It was those words that were the most surprising of all. They came from one of the women who'd been so lively and pleased up until just a moment earlier.

My master winced at this sudden turn, automatically reaching down to put her hand on my head.

"Just where do you think you are? This is a church, the house of God!"

"Come now, don't scream at me like that. I'm allowed to come to church, too, am I not? It's not the righteous man that needs God, but the wicked man," he said, his lip curling up at one corner in a sarcastic sneer.

His expression was clearly hostile, but it was difficult to see at what the spearpoint of his malice was aimed.

Just as I was feeling a certain kinship with that, one of the women ventured to answer.

"Shut your mouth! You usurer! You loan shark!"

The man merely shrugged off the vicious accusation—he raised his hands to about the level of his shoulders, his palms facing the women.

Usurer. Moneylender.

So he was one of us.

"Fine, fine. But I haven't come after your meager little coin purses today, I'll have you know."

The reaction of the women in that instant was indescribably comical. They looked at each other uncertainly. "Well, if that's so..."

I understood humans surprisingly well for a dog. Their thoughts were utterly obvious to me.

"E-er, do you have some business with me?" said my master, after a few moments of silence.

The women's body language told her not to talk to this fellow, but my kindhearted master finally met the man's gaze—whereupon a smile bloomed upon his face, and he spoke in a merry tone.

"Well, we met in such circumstances earlier today, after all! After you left, I heard the circumstances from Ars, and I knew I couldn't leave the situation as it was."

"...Ci-circumstances?" asked one of the women finally, unable to restrain her curiosity. It was like dangling a barley shoot in front of a cat.

The man shrugged again and answered, "Listen up, you all. This girl came here in search of work."

Everyone's gazes fell upon her, and my master froze in sudden fear.

"She came here to this plague-ridden town that everyone else is fleeing. She came all this way to become a seamstress, and Ars screamed at her and drove her away."

The silence that followed was surely a long one for my master. I managed to hold back my growl, but my master's hand gripped the back of my neck with nearly painful force. The tension was like the first step onto the rickety boards of an old bridge across a deep river, and everyone there felt it.

When gazes fell upon my master in a town, they held fear, hostility, and hatred. The same staff that was used to gather sheep in the fields would drive people away when in town.

Witch. Pagan. Shepherd.

All three words carried the same meaning, and my master was always looking down.

Just as I was starting to worry that her grip around my neck was going to choke me to death—

"Welcome to Kuskov!" said one of the women with tears in her eyes, taking my master's empty hands in hers. My master, not understanding, remained downcast until her gaze flicked frantically here and there as the other women gathered around her to join in the embrace. Since she'd done the same thing to me just a moment earlier, I decided to let her be.

But I noticed that the man was still watching us with unsmiling eyes.

I knew that moneylenders were largely despised. No doubt he was envious of the treatment my master was getting.

"Well, you know Ars—she can be rather stubborn. You might have to wait awhile, but circumstances change. So please, don't leave town yet. Stay awhile. That's all I wanted to say," said the man, even as my master was surrounded by the women. One corner of his lips was still curled up. "And please, do let me know if you'd like to be a seamstress," he finished with a courteous bow.

The women had silently listened to the man's talk up until that point, but embracing my master together, they replied for her.

"Have some shame, moneylender! How dare you try to get this girl's help!"

"That's right, don't you dare try to make her suffer the way you have us!"

The man endured these rebukes with that same half smile of his. Perhaps he was used to it. "My name is Johan Erdrich. They say I'm a usurer, but really I'm just a money changer."

"How dare you tell such an obvious lie in the church!"

"I exchange the money of now for the money of the future, so

I'm a money changer." His expression still didn't change, but for the first time, his words carried some force.

The women all fell suddenly silent, as though doused in cold water, and it took some time before the strength came back to their gazes.

"That's all I had to say. Now then, if you'll excuse me." His final smile was of a piece with the smiles of all who make their living in trade.

A strange exhaustion lingered, as though a storm had blown itself out in the room. The women held their breath until Johan's footsteps disappeared.

"W-well, anyhow, if you've come looking for work, you're very welcome here. Kuskov will surely recover."

"Yes, yes! Just having more people to make the town lively again is a great help."

Perhaps because this treatment was so different from Ars's attitude, my master was a bit worried, but once she understood that the women were not lying to her, a smile gradually returned to her face.

It was the smile of one who had spent many days in the field finally catching sight of a town.

When I looked up at my master's face, she nodded with a smile.

That night, we returned to the inn.

"What a busy day," said my master as she stroked my back with her bare feet.

How right she was.

Certainly it had been more stimulating than herding sheep.

THREE

The next day, our breakfast was a very lively one.

The brave little knights that had survived the plague gathered in our room and listened fervently to my master's stories. It was not certain whether or not one of the women my master had spoken to in the church the previous day had spread the word she was perfectly suited to caring for children, but in any case, when the innkeeper had come to bring breakfast, the children were right behind her.

But perhaps because she felt she owed a debt for staying at the inn, my master invited them into her room with nary a pause, sharing her small breakfast with them and telling tales, both myths and stories from her travels.

I was a bit exasperated with my master's strong sense of duty, but I endured the little knights' rather rude treatment of me without any complaint. I was rather impressed with my own forbearance, honestly, and eventually I noticed that my master's stories had diverted their attention from me.

The youngest wound up on my master's lap and eventually fell asleep. On either side of her presently were slightly larger

children, who clung to her clothing and looked up at her, totally absorbed in her story.

My master's face was uncharacteristically mild, and even when she had to quiet a fussing child or soothe the tears of one who'd misunderstood her stories, she did so happily. She seemed nearly overwhelmed a few times but has also matured quite a bit herself. Knowing as I did that my master had been driven around by her shepherd's staff more than she'd wielded it herself, I couldn't help but find this rather affecting.

And of course, it seemed more natural for my human master to be surrounded by human children. Although there was not much difference between the ability to communicate with them and with me.

"...And they lived happily ever after!" As she finished the story, there was a collective sigh of relief from the children. They'd all been rather absorbed in it, apparently.

Still, it wouldn't take much for them to become even more savage than I. If you gave them something to eat, they would stuff themselves fit to burst—which was even more true when it came to stories, since no matter how many they heard, their appetite never lessened. My master was beginning to seem a bit troubled by their endless demands for more, more!

I was a knight, and my most basic job was to protect my master. Just as I thought she was about to seek my help, there was a sudden hiccup. My master, still harassed by children pulling on her clothes and her hair, froze.

I backed up. Something was coming. A dark cloud seem to rise up and darken the room. Then there was a terrible, thunderous sound.

"...Waaaaaaaaaah!"

The astonishing noise dizzied me. My master flailed haplessly in the face of the screaming child.

Lambs are easy—they can walk the moment they're born. But human children are different.

Though my master frantically tried to calm the child, its intense screams drowned everything else out.

What had happened? Even I was starting to worry.

"Ha-ha, here, miss, let me help!"

These same children had moments earlier been grabbing shamelessly at my master's hair and clothing, as selfishly as any barnyard animal. They giggled as they spoke, then took the infant from my master's lap. The children were not much larger than the infant. And yet somehow, they had no trouble holding it and quieting it.

They seemed quite adept at the skill, and when I looked at my master, I saw that she, too, was round-eyed with surprise.

The infant was finally calmed, happily poking at the chest of the child who held it. The remaining children followed after him, looking for all the world like a flock of chickens. The only thing that indeed did distinguish them from chickens was how they turned and waved to my master on their way out of the room.

It had been so noisy just moments earlier, but now it was suddenly silent, and all that remained was a strange feeling of fatigue. My master stared blankly at the left-open door for a while.

Eventually she returned to the present, and the next thing she did was put her hand to her chest. If I had been human, I would have laughed.

Something seemed to occur to her, and she looked down at her chest, then over to me. The smile that played about her lips was a wicked one.

She stood from her chair and walked over to me, then crouched down. "You were laughing at me, weren't you?"

Absurd! Preposterous!

I looked away, but she showed me no mercy. She pushed me over onto my back, and as I lay there, she began to rub my belly.

I was a proud sheepdog, but where I could impose my will upon sheep, I could not so easily control my own instincts. In the moments that followed I was thoroughly reminded just who was the master here.

"Still, what shall we do next?" said my master suddenly, as with a borrowed needle and thread she attended to the mending of her clothes. "It was nice of those ladies to give me such a kind welcome, I suppose."

She cut the thread with her teeth and held the mended patch up high to confirm that the hole was properly closed and that the stitching was neat. As my master moved, the loosely packed straw mattress shifted. I went along with it, as I was lying upon it.

I yawned; the back of my neck was stroked.

"We can't very well stay here imposing, but... it would be nice if some sort of work came up, until the town calms down a bit."

Had she not been perfectly suited to caring for children? I thought, and evidently the same thing occurred to her.

"I can't make any money just looking after children, though..."

It was probably a fair point since she couldn't be a wet nurse. Cows and goats were useful for their milk. She couldn't very well produce wool, nor (obviously) meat—so her future was dim.

Without me, she would have been in a precarious position indeed.

"Enek?" My master looked at me with a smile, needle in hand, her head cocked slightly. I realized that this was what it was like to feel totally paralyzed. I couldn't help but curl up my tail. She nudged my head. "I thought I'd be able to find work as a seamstress here, but..."

She held up the mended coat one more time, then clasped it

to her chest and fell backward onto the bed. Seeing this, I slowly raised my head, only to rest it on her stomach. She seemed a bit surprised by this, but then gently placed her left hand atop my head.

Previously, whenever she had been unable to sleep from hunger, she would have me lay my head on her stomach to compress it slightly. Humans were surprisingly simple creatures, and such a trick evidently made the hunger easier to bear.

So long as bellies are full, the world was well—that's what she would say with a smile when things were difficult.

"Mmmmm-hmmm..."

A strange sound reached my ears; my master was humming. It was a work song sung by the clothiers of Ruvinheigen. The men would sing it deliberately comically, while the women's voices were lovely. With worktables protruding into the street or from behind opened window shutters, they would sing as they worked. With my master's meager income, she could hardly afford to let others do her mending, and after so many times passing through the crafters' district, she had memorized the song's melody. She didn't know the lyrics and also didn't seem to quite know how it ended.

But sometimes—like now—she would softly, faintly hum the song as she daydreamed. Perhaps she only hummed it while lying back and looking up at the sky, because she didn't want the tears to spill out of her eyes.

I might not look it, but I have a bit of a poet's soul, so such things occur to me.

When she raised her head and looked at me, my master was not crying. But I could tell what she was seeing with those eyes. It was the happy, busy street of the crafters.

They all seemed to know each other, and though they were boisterous, they were likewise friendly; and so, whenever my

master saw their simple, honest lives, she looked like a child enviously gazing at another child's toy. I did not much like to see her that way.

And yet, our days had been constantly difficult then. I had no right to blame her for occasionally showing weakness. The thing I wanted her to stop most of all was her absentminded pulling of my fur and skin. Eventually she became so absorbed in the song that she was tapping out the time by patting my head.

Around the time I had become a musical instrument, I heard somebody on the other side of the door.

I sat up suddenly, and my master glared at me for disrupting her performance. My irritation at this vanished when I saw her face turn confused at the knock at the door that came next.

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you asleep?" It was the innkeeper woman who'd brought the children with her in the morning.

"Oh n-no, I—thank you for lending me a needle!" Hurriedly smoothing her bed-rumpled hair, my master hastily offered the needle back to the innkeeper. My guess was that the woman was smiling not at my master's mussed hair, but rather her tuneless humming. But as a knight it was my duty not to point that out.

"A messenger came a moment ago. Apparently the bishop wishes to speak with you."

My master's hands froze where they were smoothing her hair, and she looked at me. "The bishop?"

"He seems to have finished his morning duties. You weren't able to speak to him yesterday, were you?"

My master nodded, and she hurriedly put on the coat she'd just finished mending.

"Oh, if you do see you bishop, please ask him to pray for my inn. We've been busy, and I haven't been able to ask him myself."

She was every bit as brazen as she looked. But there were advantages to being approachable.

We quickly finished making ready, and then put the inn behind us. We only just arrived here yesterday, but already my master had learned the streets well enough to walk them confidently.

"I wonder what he wants to talk to me about. Oh, but first I must thank him! An 'angel,' eh?"

My master giggled and put her finger to her chin as she talked to herself, which was a common habit among those who lived solitary lives, although her smile was shamefully obvious. She was clearly pleased to have been called an angel the previous day.

But the fact that she was absorbed in forward-thinking daydreams was no doubt due to the town's influence. The town had seemed so lonely yesterday, simply because we had been comparing it to Ruvinheigen, the dust of whose streets we'd only just kicked off our feet. But with a little more time, it was clear from the townspeople and their lives that this town had a liveliness to it yet.

There were people gathering rags and scraps, and coopers and carpenters attending to their repairs. In front of the tinkers' and cobblers' shops, too, people waited for mending to be done. While there was not yet the freedom to make new things, it was obvious that the town had recovered enough to begin repairs. My master's gaze lingered not on the town's wounds, but on its blossoms of hearty activity. Happily we walked and more quickly than usual.

She clasped her hands behind her as she walked, which I had only seen her doing before in dark alleyways, copying the way the town girls in Ruvinheigen held themselves. It spoke of the way she was enjoying herself on her own terms, unconcerned with the gazes of others.

It seemed a good thing to me. So when I noticed *him*, I sighed to myself, then rumbled a growl.

"Ah—" My master could spot a wolf hiding in wooded shadows

from a hill at a good remove: She quickly noticed what I was growling at.

At the end of her gaze, leaning against a door and speaking with a stout woman under a building's eaves, was a young man. It was the young moneylender—Johan, he'd said his name was.

"What should we do?" my master asked, turning to me. Then—

"Hey, you there!" he called.

We had no quibble with Johan, but we knew perfectly well his profession was despised in the town. And in fact, simply being acknowledged by Johan earned my master a suspicious look from the woman.

But Johan seemed to notice this look and whispered something in the woman's ear, whereupon her expression changed to surprise, and she looked back at us, putting her hands together and offering us a prayer.

Johan then gave us a proud look, as though showing off his handiwork.

I looked up at my master and saw that she wore an exhausted, pained smile.

"What a fortunate encounter! This must be God's will," said Johan, jingling the small coins in his hand as he walked toward us. He then tucked the coins away beneath his jacket and took out a small Church amulet that he wore around his neck, lightly kissing it.

It was such an absurd affectation that my master did not know how to reply, but it was clear enough to me that this was Johan's idea of a joke. This man was the sort of person who would happily sell the Church if it would turn him a profit.

"H-hello again."

"Good day to you! And to your little knight, too."

I gave him a nasty look.

Johan recoiled slightly but soon recovered. "Come, let us walk,"

he said, casually taking up the position at my master's other side. "So, Miss Norah—"

At Johan's sudden use of her name, my master's shoulders froze. When had she introduced herself to him?

Johan raised both hands and made a jesting face. "My apologies," he said gently. "After all those children went running home with smiles on their faces, news about you spread quickly."

It was a small town.

I sniffed at a scrap of fabric in the street, then looked up.

"Did you do that sort of work in other towns, Miss Norah?" he asked with a personable smile. His appearance was smart and his demeanor gentle—young women were surely constantly after him in more normal times.

But my master did not live such a fickle life.

She could sense something unpleasant lurking behind Johan's words and drew her chin in, repulsed.

"It was a jest. I didn't intend to tease you. But this town is my territory, you see. I wanted to see what sort of person you were."

Johan took my master's hand and gazed at it appraisingly for a moment before slowly releasing it.

My fangs were demanding to know when they'd be allowed to plunge themselves into his leg, but suddenly my master put her hand on my head. *Wait*, it meant.

"You're a shepherd, aren't you?"

I heard the rustling of cloth, which may as well have been the sound of my master closing her heart. I looked up and saw that she was as expressionless as a statue in a field as she looked back at Johan. That solid, trustworthy, reliable face of hers.

Johan seemed to catch wind of the incompatibility of that face with other humans. He smirked an unpleasant smirk, then smoothly turned his gaze elsewhere. He folded his hands together behind his head, then deliberately strode off.

"I thought you might be, but I just wasn't certain."

My master did not reply.

Johan continued, unconcerned. "The sheep around here are raised by farmers. So long as you don't tell anyone yourself, your secret will be safe."

My master's gaze was unwavering, despite his nonchalant tone. His next words, though, stunned us both.

"Anyhow, that's a relief."

"...Wha...?" said my master, her brow furrowing.

The moneylender's eyes were closed, as though he were enjoying the warmth of the sun. "The bishop sent for you, yes?" he said, as though it was nothing.

"...Yes."

"You'll see when you get there. He didn't call for me, so I wanted to see what sort of fellow he *did* summon." It still wasn't clear what his point was, but he did not seem to be teasing. Far from it—Johan gave my master another look out of the corner of his eye, and when he continued speaking, it was in a more serious tone. "You don't seem to lack experience, so I'm relieved you're a capable enough girl, so far as that goes. Although," he finished, looking her up and down one last time, "you might be a bit too wispy. You ought to eat a little more."

My master hugged her chest, then realized she'd given away her biggest insecurity. She blushed red and looked down, and watching this, Johan laughed.

Restrained by my master's hand, I was unable to do anything—but no more. I faced the fool who'd incurred my wrath and, baring my fangs, bit his leg.

When we passed through the door of the church, the woman who'd greeted us yesterday had a wary look on her face—because

my master seemed utterly downcast and moreover had a thin sheen of sweat on her.

But perhaps she decided we'd merely come in haste, because she said nothing and led my master farther in.

When I'd bitten Johan, he'd fallen to the ground and screamed in such a voice you'd think the world was ending. I know perfectly well when it's acceptable to cause injury and when it isn't, so I made sure not to break the skin. Instead, I'd made a ferocious growl and given the hem of his clothing a nice tear at the end. Johan had made a great fuss over the state of his leg for a while, but eventually understood that he hadn't been injured and then made a face as though he'd been nipped by a fox. It was a beautiful thing to see.

Thus, I was feeling rather proud of myself, but my master did not seem to feel the same way. She was more crestfallen than I had ever seen her before, as she compared the chest of the woman leading us to her own.

But even that sad expression lasted only until we arrived at the sanctuary.

It was impossible for the church to hide its poor condition, particularly given the cloth that was draped in place of the doors, which had rusted off their hinges.

The woman leading us pulled the cloth aside, and gestured for my master to enter. My fur bristled at the gazes that fell upon us.

"I have brought her," said the woman who led us there.

There was no particular commonality in the age or appearance of the people assembled there. There were fat old men, young women, and people bent over with age. The only thing I felt from all of them was a sense of responsibility, which in the human world was authority's constant companion. It seemed my master had not been called over for a pleasant chat.

My master's hand trembled. She looked for me like I was air and she was underwater and grabbed my coat. I wondered if she was thinking about the shepherd's staff leaning against the wall in our inn room.

I regarded the assembled faces that were all staring so appraisingly at my master. Next to Giuseppe, who we'd come to visit the previous day, there was another familiar person.

Her eyes were suspicious and bitter with her grudge against the world, and the color of her twisted, sneering lips was not good. Her eyes were on the figure in the bed, her hand resting on his hands, which were folded over his midsection atop a book of scripture.

Those eyes of hers rolled up like fish swimming lazily in a pond, and Ars looked at my master. Then her lips moved with great reluctance, and she spoke in slow, measured tones. "Are you God's servant, Norah Arendt?"

What sort of question was this? But compared to the next question, it was nothing.

"In the name of Giuseppe Ozenstein, I appoint thee as the deacon of the church of Kuskov," said Ars, as my master and I stood there uncomprehendingly.

When none of the assembled townspeople laughed, I realized it was no joke. It was only as Ars continued speaking that my master snapped out of her daze.

"This is not a joke," Ars informed us coldly. My master stood there, frozen.

What had happened?

With all these different people there, each one wearing such a grave expression, even if my master hadn't been so shortsighted, she wouldn't have thought of *that* possibility.

Lying there on the bed so quietly, Giuseppe looked very frail indeed.

But when I looked up at my master, someone else seemed to understand what she was thinking.

"The bishop is merely sleeping. Of course, we don't know what will become of him yet, so... Ars, if you please," said a man, and with that the gazes of the assembled people moved to him, and they all quietly filed out of the church.

The only ones left behind were Ars and my master, as well as old Giuseppe.

Giuseppe's face was like paper, and his expression was not good, his cheeks sunken. He'd summoned all he could of his energy to speak just moments earlier, and it had apparently exhausted him. My master, seemingly unthinking, drew alongside Giuseppe, at which point Ars cleared her throat.

"I have the bishop's message for you," she said, clearly not willing to brook any argument.

It was unclear what the message would be, save that it must have had something to do with Giuseppe. Ars frowned at him, then heaved a sigh. "Anyway, sit," she said, indicating a chair in the corner of the room.

My master did as she was told, sitting down on the chair, meek as a kitten. I curled up at her feet.

The chief of the clothiers' guild stood, her arms folded, and spoke plainly. "You may as well understand that there is no way for you to become a seamstress here in this town."

At the sudden pronouncement, my master barely had time to show surprise. "E-er...," she began, confused and troubled, but Ars cut her off peevishly. I wondered why she was so angry, but then I realized it.

It must have pained her.

"To begin with, we have no materials to make clothes with. We have no customers to order the clothes. And when the town recovers, those who fled to neighboring places will return. What do you suppose they will do when they find outsiders sitting in their chairs?"

She spoke rapidly, as though if she didn't hurry, she would stumble over her own tongue. No one would wish to speak this way to another who aspires to their livelihood.

My master seemed to understand this, and without anger or sadness, she simply felt the disappointment that Ars's undeniable words brought. "I... I see...," she said. Then suddenly she looked up. "I understand."

In times like these, a smile was the most natural expression of all for my master. It was perhaps not the healthiest thing, to be so skilled at the smile of defeat, but for that very same reason it affected the guilty-seeming Ars all the more deeply.

She flinched away, as though looking in a magic mirror that reflected only her own unsightliness. Ars looked at the floor and gritted her teeth.

The impression she'd given yesterday was too strong but also truly badly timed.

So far as she seemed now, Ars was nothing more than a girl even more tongue-tied than my master was.

"...So, given all that, we must talk."

"Huh?"

"The bishop asked this of me just moments ago. He needs a favor from you." Was she seen as quiet and serious, the stubborn seamstress of the town? Perhaps. Ars kept looking down, but then she glanced up at my master harshly. "He's named you as deacon. By his authority as bishop."

Hearing it a second time ought to have made it easier to grasp, but I still could not understand it. My master seemed to be in

the same predicament. But she was past even panic and merely looked back at Ars with questioning eyes.

"The town is in a bad place," said Ars, spitting the words out and averting her gaze, turning her head aside. Then her eyes alone refocused on my master. "The town of Rezul is trying to take us over."

"... Take you over?"

"You... when you came to my workshop, you saw, didn't you? There aren't any proper materials left in this town. Everything of value was sold at a deep discount to reckless merchants. No one who we can sell anything to is coming here anymore, the price of wheat has risen, likewise meat, and we're all of us utterly without money. Rezul is trying to take advantage of that."

A wounded animal—even a bear—would not escape being hunted by other beasts. Though they might fight desperately, they would always end up as food.

It seemed that law did not apply only in the forests and fields.

"Our town is in a desperate position, but if we had materials, there are craftsmen here who can work and merchants who will sell. But without the materials, nothing can be done. So the town of Rezul came and offered us a loan."

It was not at all uncommon for the ship that seemed to be offering rescue to instead be heading to hell. One only had to consider how hated Johan was to see that much.

"But... why make me a deacon?" asked my master, her eyes upturned.

"Well, obviously we can't accept their offer. Ever. If we accept it, our town will be swallowed up. We would have to pay back all the money and with plenty of interest, too."

The visitor that had come to Ars's workshop when my master had been there was none other than Johan. Most of the town was probably deep in debt already. The only people growing fat were

those like Johan, who were devouring the wounded. That was the way of things.

But that did not answer my master's question.

Ars realized that herself and scratched her nose uncomfortably. She took a deep breath and continued.

"We want you to bargain with Rezul. As our deacon."

The girl had still not made her point. She had no gift for speech certainly. Of course, my master's capacity for such things was not much bigger than her chest, so perhaps this dribble of information was for the best.

"To bargain..."

"Yes. If a proper merchant went, we'd probably lose. If they let slip that one town was refusing to sell to another town, there would surely be a fight. Maybe even a war. But if the church goes and tells them we won't trade with unbelievers like them, that's quite different. Nobody wants to risk a war with the church. We might be able to avoid a crisis."

I finally understood and glanced at Giuseppe on the bed. I saw why he would've put my master up as deacon, and furthermore, why Ars was the one explaining.

"And so, if you're the deacon, then... well, look at the bishop. Someone has to act in his stead. Of course, we asked why we couldn't just use someone from the Kuskov, but he knows better than we do how things are in other towns," said Ars with a sigh.

She seemed exhausted, and I was certain I didn't misread her—she *was* exhausted. I thought back to moments earlier, when so many people had left the room. No doubt all of them, like Ars, held important positions in the town.

And also like Ars, many of them should not have had those positions. Some of them were elderly and should have long since retired; others, like Ars, were far too young.

In other words, there were no more substitutes left for the town.

"And of course, Rezul knows we'll probably try to use the Church as a shield, which makes people from the town even less useful. 'You're not from the Church!' they'd say. Ugh, those Rezul bastards are awful. Have you heard the rumors? Barbarous pagans, the lot of them. They wear arrowheads around their necks!"

As Ars spat out her words, I was suddenly struck by a shock that felt almost like a physical blow to my head.

In that moment, how many memories were finally tied together with a single thread?

The raging plague meant that the once-busy road was now deserted—the pagan bandits attacking the travelers, the bishop's brave party.

And above all, the strangely grand welcome we'd received upon arriving in the village.

The town had been desperate to avoid the trap Rezul was setting and had exhausted every option. And then despite Giuseppe's favorable reply, he'd arrived gravely wounded.

And then they had hit upon this plan, even if my master was poorly suited to it.

Ars's eyes went wide, and she looked at Giuseppe with a little gasp. Given her reaction, Giuseppe must never have explained who attacked him. A moment's thought made it clear why.

If the townspeople knew that the pagans had attacked Giuseppe for their own profit, no matter how exhausted they were, they would've taken weapons in hand and risen up, like a cornered rat turning to face a mouse.

And if it came to battle, this town would surely lose.

"And so we needed a traveler, and one who seems like they could be working for the Church—and so we chose you."

Ruvinheigen was known as the Church City, but if people knew what sorts of things really happened there, they'd think it worse

than any other place—and my master had escaped only to find that no matter the town similar things were always happening.

The sad reality was sinking in, but suddenly she realized something and looked up.

If I could've, I would have raised my paw to cover my face, the way a human could.

"E-er!"

"Hmm?"

"I understand now. But... um... so... why did you tell me to... er... give up on being a seamstress?"

My master, for her part, still had some lingering attachment to the idea of becoming a seamstress.

It was unlike her to press the issue like this, but just as I wanted to hide my face, the question seemed to pain Ars as well. That she could go on at such a rapidly rambling length without ever getting to the point was because she wasn't actually such an ill-mannered girl.

She was merely awkward and was actually rather kind.

"...Because you'll have to go act as our town's deacon and negotiate with them."

"Right."

"And after that... if you were to start working as a seamstress as though nothing had happened..."

Don't you see? Ars's upturned eyes begged.

In matters like these, my master could be as dense as a sheep. After a moment of baffled staring, the lines finally connected in her mind. "Ah!" she cried out.

"You see? It would be strange. So that's why."

That's why Giuseppe had Ars deliver this message.

My master had wanted to become a seamstress so badly, she'd ignored the danger and come to this town. No doubt Giuseppe himself had felt badly for her. But sometimes to save the flock,

a single lamb had to be left to die, and the situation in this town had called for a similar decision.

So at the very least, he decided to have the clothiers' guild chief be the one to deliver the news.

A heavy silence fell between the two girls.

Neither of them was at fault. It was just ill-fated, and that was all.

"L-look..."

It was Ars who first broke the silence. "About yesterday... I'm sorry."

My master was caught off guard by the sudden words. She waved her hands meaninglessly, then finally managed a reply. "Oh n-no, um... I was only thinking of myself, so..." She spoke apologetically with her face downcast, and it seemed to pain Ars to see her so.

"Johan got so angry at me, too; I couldn't believe it... I really felt like I was to blame."

"Huh?"

"I mean... it's hard to explain, but you risked your life to come here, didn't you? You wanted to be a seamstress. That was your goal. You risked your life and came to this town for that, and that's when I finally realized—what I'd done. During the plague, when everyone was dying, I just cried and cried and didn't..."

Her words were halting, but that only made it clearer that they were coming from her heart. Seeing her like this, Ars truly was a normal, kindhearted girl. The doubt in her eyes came from the worry that cursed her heart.

"So that's how I realized... we can't go on like this." Ars took a deep breath, looked up, and straightened her back. Then she looked my master right in the face, with all the dignity due anyone with the title of guild chief. "So I'll ask you again. I'm well

aware that I smashed your dream. You won't have to be our deacon forever. But just for now, will you help save this town?"

Ars put her right hand to her chest and pressed her heels smartly together. And then she bowed her head.

In Ruvinheigen, town merchants would make a similar gesture to curry favor with the Church. It was a strange feeling to understand that this was the situation that truly called for such a gesture, which was meant as a sign of deep respect.

And what of my master?

A bit worried, I looked over at her beside me, then immediately realized I was wrong to have doubted her.

Even as the dream she'd thought was so close went winging forever out of her reach, her back was straight and her expression kind and smiling.

"This, too, must be the will of God."

"S-so, you'll—!"

"Yes. I'll do whatever I can."

In this world, it often seems kindness is rewarded with loss. But for my part, I have no interest in serving a master who would think only of herself.

Ars had tears at the corners of her eyes as she shook my master's hand, either from deep emotion or simple relief. My master, meanwhile, continued to smile.

She seemed truly saintly in that moment, as though coming to the aid of another was the greatest happiness to which she might aspire.

Though I was a mere dog, I still found my master's actions moving. My master, meanwhile, embraced the sobbing Ars, then gave me a slightly awkward smile.

"I did it again," her expression said.

But I merely wagged my tail, because I loved my master when she was like this.

* * *

Talk is cheap. Action is difficult.

It's an obvious principle, particularly when the action in question is becoming a deacon.

Perhaps that was what occupied my master's mind.

Once the hour grew late, we finally returned to the inn, and illuminated by the candlelight, she looked like a dried-out herring.

"...Ungh...I'm so tired," she said, collapsing down onto the bed without paying any mind at all to the fact that I was already curled up on it.

I barely managed to avoid a direct impact, but the more tired my master became, the worse her disposition. No, not worse, exactly—perhaps *childish* would be a better term.

In either case, she stretched her arms out and gathered me aimlessly up. "Enek, I'm so tired..."

She embraced me without so much as asking, with such force that I worried she might rub my fur right off.

It was frankly uncomfortable, but as my master buried her face in the soft fur around my throat, I caught the sharp scent of ink.

Though she'd claimed to have done odd jobs for the Church in Ruvinheigen, all she really knew were a few prayers. When she confessed as much, Ars and the women taking care of Giuseppe had looked at each other, then nodded.

I could only understand fragments of what happened next.

Town merchants and craftsmen all had various saints they venerated, and daily prayer rites were performed by each guild, with the guild chief acting in the priest's stead.

Thus, until Giuseppe awoke, they summoned the various guild chiefs, and together they pounded the basics of the prayer services into my master's head.

My master could read, but her writing was not as strong. I was

in no position to boast since I couldn't read at all, but it seemed that even as flattery her writing could hardly be praised. When she gave it a try, even Aman, who'd come from the Rowen Trade Guild to cheer her on, couldn't help but grimace.

My master had occasionally practiced writing with her shepherd's staff in the dirt, but it seemed she was far from adequate—she was quite adept at pictures of dogs and sheep, though.

So it happened that my master had the writing and prayers she would need to act as an impromptu deacon drilled into her, right there in the church's sanctuary. I stayed by her side for a while, but eventually she began looking to me for help, which ruined her concentration, and I was shooed out. Her face in that moment was the very image of worldly suffering. I was uneasy leaving my master alone, but there was nothing for it. I hardened my heart as I was carried away and returned to the inn.

Which brought us to this moment.

Finally she raised her head up from my chest, flopped over on the bed, and stretched. There came a sound like the cracking of dry twigs underfoot.

I sniffed her hand, and in addition to the wax from the writing tablet, there was another, sweeter scent.

"You're lucky, Enek, not having to work so hard," she said as I licked at her hand after a few more sniffs. My master was always nastier when she was tired. "Tomorrow they're going to teach me the basics of contract negotiation, and they said I have to recite the replies I'll need to prove I'm really of the Church, if asked... I hope I can do it. I can barely remember what I learned today..."

My tail drooped from the ill treatment I'd suffered at the hands of my master, but seeing her worry so, I couldn't very well ignore her. If I was her knight, I had to support my master.

"Mmm... hee-hee. You're right. I'll be fine."

She may have been covered in ink and wax, but when I stuck my snout in her hair, the same old scent was still there. I snuffled a little bit on purpose, and she answered me with a childish giggle.

We played as we had played countless times before. And after giving as good as she got, her hand suddenly stopped, like it always did. Her face was clear and calm, as though she'd thrown all her troublesome thoughts right out of the window.

"I suppose my dream's run off again. I'll have to do my best to help these people," said my master, looking steadily at me. Her eyes were kind and strong. Shepherd's eyes. "And anyway, they've apologized so much and thanked me even more. I've barely had any time at all to feel sad."

She laughed ticklishly, then lightly took hold of my right front paw. She didn't do anything special with it, though, just held it in her hand.

"Mr. Aman even asked me if I would come work for his guild. He said they have connections in all sorts of town and could work something out. He said if I did that, other people would be helping me."

As she spoke, my master's eyelids got lower and lower. She spoke as though each one of her words was brushing against her cheek, like drops of summer rain on a hot day.

My master's will was weak in the face of the needs of others. Especially when they asked favors of her.

So far as I could see, she was in no position to be helping anyone. Given her position as a girl with no money, no status, no education, no power, there was nothing to be done about it; not even the strength she'd gained as a shepherd changed that status very much.

The bargain she'd struck with the merchant and the wolf had been little different. My master had been well aware of the

dangers she was risking, but couldn't help being affected by how much the merchant had needed her.

It was only when her own gain was in the balance that she was able to turn away.

Of course, she had been swayed by the large amount of money involved, which far from saddening me came as something of a relief.

"They even said if everything goes well, I could just continue on as a proper deacon here."

I looked sharply up at my master, unable to simply let those words pass by.

"I don't know if I should do that, though... Apparently there's precedent, but still...," she said, giving me a pained smile.

As far as I was concerned, she was already being disgustingly obedient to the Church, but it wasn't as though her feelings on the matter were entirely pure, either.

She made a face like it was all a bit of a joke, then pulled on my paw and brought her mouth close to it. "But I still wish I could become a seamstress. Is that selfish of me?"

I put some force into my front paws. My white-tinged paws pressed against her mouth, giving her a funny-looking expression. I was angry, I was laughing at her, and I was sulking a bit.

My master closed her eyes. Then, capriciously, she opened her mouth wide and tried to bite my cheeky paws.

I pulled them back, but then she leaned forward as though unwilling to let me go so easily. Just when I was ready to try and gain the upper hand, though, there was a hesitant knock at the door.

"Y-yes!" answered my master, rapping me on the head as though I were a mischievous child, then fixing her clothes and climbing out of bed.

From the other side of the door came Ars's voice. "I'm sorry to bother you so late at night."

"Not at all," answered my master, looking Ars over from top to bottom. Something about Ars had changed, despite the late hour.

"I'm sure you're tired, but I need a bit of your time. May I come in?"

My master nodded and stepped back, allowing Ars into the room.

Ars entered, carrying something in her arms, then reached back and closed the door behind her, as my master looked on, vaguely confused.

I climbed down from the bed and circled around Ars. What was she planning to do?

Illuminated only by dim candlelight, Ars's face was entirely free of the suspicion she'd shown during the day. On the contrary, she seemed so energized that it surprised me.

"I've just been to Lord Careca's manor, where I scavenged this."

"Scavenged...?"

"That's right. Look," said Ars as she unrolled a large, pure white sheet of fabric. "We'll make your vestments with this. It's fine cloth—normally only the guild master would be able to use it...but that's me now. Anyway, that's good cloth." Ars narrowed her eyes and gave the fabric an appraising look.

It was just a single sheet, but was so fine that seeing it unrolled like this made it strangely easy to imagine how imposing a priest clad in such robes would be.

"Originally it was a tablecloth in Lord Careca's manor." My master was a bit surprised by this, and it was true—when I sniffed at it I caught a faint whiff of fish and mustard seed. "We don't have much time to make your clothes, so we've got to get your measurements today."

Ars neatly folded the cloth with practiced ease; then from within the bag she'd brought, she produced a thin cord with measuring marks running all along it.

It seemed she was going to use it to take my master's measurements. It was very clever of her.

"If there were more time, I'd do a proper job of it. But time is short, so... of course, when you become a real deacon, I'll make you proper clothes and not out of Mr. Careca's tablecloth," said Ars as she had my master stand and briskly made note of her arms' and legs' measurements. Then she smiled a sly smile.

My master was quite ticklish, so that was part of why she was giggling. But she also must have found it amusing to think that a few days earlier, she would never have imagined she'd be wearing priestly vestments made out of a nobleman's tablecloth.

Such mysterious fates the world had in store for us.

Some moments later, Ars suddenly spoke up. "Why did you want to become a seamstress?"

It was an eminently honest question, and my master answered as honestly as she'd been asked. "It seemed like I would never be able to wear pretty things, so I thought I'd at least like to make them."

Ars spun my master around as she continued to measure her, but at these words she stopped to face her. Chuckling, she spoke with a certain amount of mischief in her voice. "It's quite difficult to make pretty things, too, you know. At first you never get to make anything besides raggedy work clothes for old men."

My master was dutifully surprised by Ars's resentful-sounding words.

"Far from it; apprentices don't even get to touch a needle. In our trade guild, a clothier apprenticeship lasts six years. The first year you do nothing but clean the workshop. The next year, you repair tools. Starting in your third year, they let you hold

a needle and scissors for the first time, but you still don't get to use cloth. All you get to use are scraps. In your fourth year, you finally start to make something that resembles clothing, but it's not until your fifth year that you're making clothes from scratch. And of course, even if you pass your journeyman's test in your sixth year, you've still a long way to go. My master... the previous master, that is, said he didn't sew a wedding gown until twelve years after he'd started as an apprentice."

Finally Ars snugged the cord around my master's chest, which she was so sensitive about. I quite distinctly saw her loosen the cord a bit before counting the measuring marks, though I wasn't sure whether that was standard practice—if she was accounting for future growth or if she was simply being kind to my master.

"Twelve years...," whispered my master, counting on her fingers.

That was much longer than I'd known her. I would surely not still be alive in twelve years.

"Though it didn't take that long before I was making priests' clothes. I must be lucky."

But that luck hadn't extended to my master, and so she had given up on becoming a seamstress in this town.

Ars looked up from the old, well-used paper she was writing on and smiled a sympathetic smile. "I know this is temporary, but since you're becoming a deacon, I think God's blessings will always be with you."

If she'd been the sort of person to leave out such consolations, she would've long since become a shrewd, cunning clothier.

My master nodded. "All right," she answered with a smile.

"If you've time, you should come by the workshop. I'll teach you a little."

"Huh?"

"You've been mending those clothes yourself, right? They're terrible," said Ars, pointing to my master's clothing.

There was no hiding the many patches and seams from all the mending she'd done, but my master hastily tried to cover them up anyway, her face red. Her ability with a needle and thread was one of the few things she took pride in, but such is the way of the world.

"I can teach you the basics, anyhow. Although there are a lot of things I still wanted to learn from my predecessor."

Ars seemed a fine clothier as she wrote on the paper with her quill pen. It was probably because she hadn't been eating well, but her slim form spoke of an ascetic virtue, and her unwavering, critical eye on the fabric had a special quality to it.

She was every inch the skilled young seamstress.

"...If you would, then."

At my master's words, Ars narrowed her eyes bashfully. "I will," she answered. "Oh, I can also teach you something else."

"Something else?"

"Yes," said Ars as she began to pack up her things.

It was getting quite late. Unable to hold back my sleepiness, I yawned, and it felt like the words that came next had been tossed right into my open mouth.

"I heard from the innkeeper that you were singing the clothiers' song a bit wrong."

A strange guffaw escaped from my throat. If I'd been human, I would've been holding my sides and laughing, I'm quite certain.

Ars grinned, but my master froze, blushing so red that it was obvious even in the dim tallow candlelight.

"Uh, um, er, that was...!"

"Ha-ha! Well, it's a bit late for it tonight, but I'll make sure to teach it to you properly. All the first-year apprentices have to learn it whether they like it or not. They even made me sing it

in the town square," Ars said nostalgically as she gathered her things.

My master was so embarrassed there were tears at the corners of her eyes, but there was a bit of happiness in her expression, too.

"So in exchange," said Ars, poking me playfully in the side with the tip of her toe, "teach me some shepherds' songs."

I turned my gaze to my master as I hurried to my feet. Her face was frozen, and then her eyes went to the wall, where her distinctive shepherd's staff rested.

She could have claimed she needed it for travel. And yet my master looked back at Ars, trying to unstick her quivering lips.

But it was Ars who spoke first, a faint smile on her face. "I heard from Johan. He comes from a long line of hated moneylenders. He was really worried. Aw, you don't have to make such a face."

Ars took two, then three steps toward my master, drawing close to whisper something in her ear. "It would make me think I ought to take a moneylender as a husband."

"—!"

I must admit that I was impressed with how many facial expressions my master assumed in such a short amount of time. "Well, I'll be off." Ars's eyes narrowed in amusement, and she turned to leave. "Sorry about yesterday, pup."

My name was *Enek*.

I gave a bark to make my point and watched her leave.

Once Ars left the room, the only sound left was the burning of the candle. I looked back at my master. She stood there with her hands on her cheeks, her expression complicated and speechless.

She would need more training before she could become a properly stoic deacon.

I curled up at my master's feet, and she looked down at me, her hands still on her cheeks. "Did she say 'husband'?"

So that was what had tripped her up, eh? I yawned and supposed it was a healthy reaction for a human girl.

The innkeeper woman brought a tattered old scripture book along with breakfast.

Evidently Giuseppe had awoken the previous night and left a message. He was not feeling well, and, planning to rise in the afternoon, he'd written prayers for my master to practice on a small, cramped scrap of cloth.

If the grand breakfast we'd enjoyed before had been thanks for our rescue of Giuseppe, the fact that today's breakfast included wheat bread again must have been the whole town's thanks for my master's decision to come to its aid.

I received my share, but I endured some teasing from my master in the process. And it was true, I didn't have to memorize anything, but I still felt some confidence in how much I'd supported her. The work of a knight was so frequently thought of as easy.

"...So be it. God is..."

My master murmured as she practiced. She'd removed one of her sandals and stroked my back with her bare foot.

When she made a mistake she would grab my fur with her toes and pull, only moving on to another spot when she finally remembered the passage, poking me in the ribs with her foot and sighing.

A lake's water will only become clean if it's deep enough for the silt to fall to the bottom. If it makes my master happy, I'll happily take as much silt as I have to, but it would have been nice for my selfless sacrifice beneath the table to earn me some praise from someone.

Or at the very least, if she would have just stopped poking my ears with her toes. Those were the only times I raised my head and put my cold nose to her feet.

"...Illuminated by...His glory. For...for...ugh...!" My master's voice was strained as she tried to remember, and it reminded me of the way she sounded when she watched the sheep giving birth.

When she finally remembered, I couldn't be certain whether there was a sound or not, but she stood up suddenly and spoke. "For thus is the will of God!"

She recited the rest easily, and it seemed she had finally managed to memorize the passage.

My master stroked my back roughly with her foot. I was well aware of her ability to concentrate, so any worry on my part would've been wasted effort. We couldn't talk to each other, but I remembered how quickly she'd become such an excellent shepherd. Compared with that, the simple memorization of a written passage was nothing.

"Ugh...I was worried about memorizing the first part, but... yes. It wasn't that hard to remember, really. Hey, Enek, are you listening?"

My master peered under the table at me, and I begrudgingly crawled out from under it.

She petted my head with a rare, self-satisfied smile. "Do you think you could learn a word or two yourself, Enek?"

I was a knight, and knights had no need for words. I turned away, and my master laughed through her nose like a proud child, rubbing my head as though making some small sport of me.

I wondered if I ought to be angry, but it had been so long since I'd seen her so carefree. Being as generous as I was, I bore the indignity without complaint.

"Oh, that's right, what time is it now?"

Though the window was open, in this unfamiliar room it was hard to tell the hour from the light coming through it. My master stood from the table, stuck her head out the window, and considered the sky.

It was refreshing to see her like this. Previously, when she looked at the sky in town, she would have been doing so from within a sheep pen strewn with hay and surrounded by rats and chickens, lying among them like someone stricken with a fever.

And then she would look up at the one tiny window high in the barn that was there only to let in a tiny amount of daylight and from that try to guess the hour. Her face would be resigned, despairing, and it would pain me to see it.

How much happier it was, then, to see her like this.

Someone she knew must have been passing by because I saw my master wave her hand out the window.

"We'd better hurry, Enek!"

I gave a bark and stood ready by the door.

My master hastily prepared herself, then mostly out of reflex, she turned her eyes to a certain place.

For a moment, her profile was sad, lonely, and even guilty.

Because of that staff, my master had suffered terrible things. And yet that same staff had seen her through to this place.

Worried, I started to back away from the door—but then I stopped because my master looked back at me with a slightly bashful smile.

We had to move on. And to do that, some things would have to be left behind.

When such times come, we need not feel sad, nor guilty, nor cling to old things.

All we need to do is feel grateful.

My master's hand stroked my head, and I gave another bark.

She opened the inn's door, and we took a single step out into the wide, unknown world.

The End



AFTERWORD

Long time no see. Isuna Hasekura here. This is Volume 13. It's a collection of short stories. To everyone waiting for the continuation of the main story, my sincere apologies. However, to the Norah fans: Here you go, a brand-new story about Norah. It covers the days following her parting with Lawrence. Enek was inexcusable! Inexcusable, I say!

I was writing Norah, and her character is so simple, so hapless, that I just couldn't get excited about the story somehow... so as a last resort, I turned to Enek. Outrageous!

The other short stories are business as usual. The only exception is the one written from Holo's perspective. That one ran in a special insert in *Dengeki Maoh*, and I very much hope you'll enjoy it.

By the way, I had a lot of fun this summer. Every year at the end of summer, I find myself regretting it and thinking, "Gosh, I really didn't get to do anything fun," so this year I went a little overboard and packed it full of plans. First, around the end of July, I got my diving license in Izu; in the beginning of August, I did a signing in Hong Kong, and fortunately, managed to extend

my stay to five nights. In the middle of the month, I went to Comiket; then toward the end of the month, I stayed three nights in Furano, Hokkaido. And just a week before I wrote this afterword, I did a one-night trip and went diving. Also, after fooling around on the guitar for a month and a half, I finally got so I can play one song.

Now that I write it all out, it looks like I really did have a lot of fun.

I'm sorry! I'll get back to work!

Speaking of work, the books and second season of the anime are both coming to an end, and we're getting into the endgame. Short stories aside, when I think about how few volumes are left, I get very emotional. But I can't just keep writing it forever, and I've already started preparation for my next project.

The contents are still a secret, but I hope to really surprise people.

On that note, we'll return to the main story in the next volume! If all goes as planned, it'll be out around the beginning of next year, I think. A single year isn't much time.

Let us meet again in the next volume.

Isuna Hasekura



This collection of short stories from the world of *Spice & Wolf* features three new vignettes from Lawrence and Holo's journeys, as well as a novella that follows Norah the shepherdess and her faithful sheepdog, Enek, as they put the city of Ruvinheigen behind them and try to forge a new path for themselves...

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